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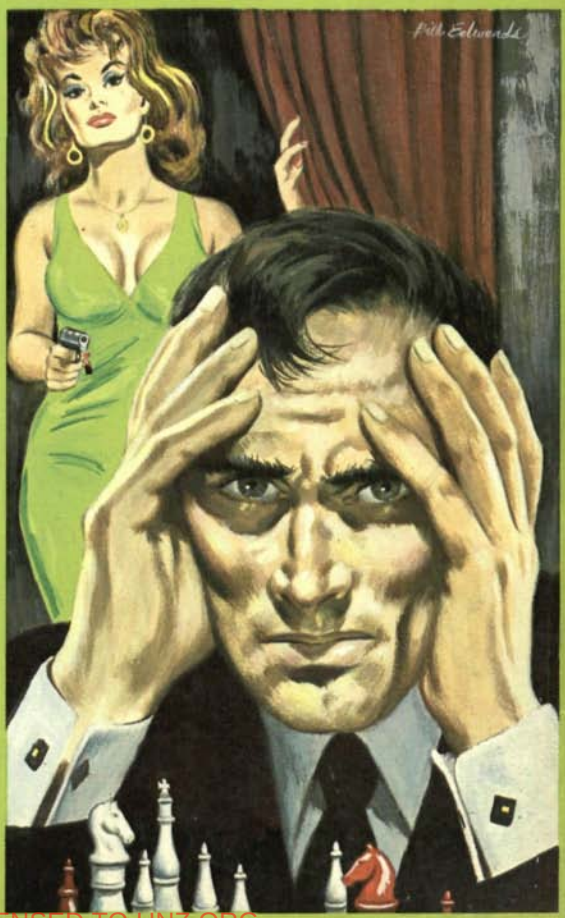

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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JULY, 1977

VOL. 41, NO. 1

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

MUSIC FOR MURDER

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Apart from the fact that Matt Kovacks had left Castle Cay without writing a bread-and-butter letter, there seemed no reason to suspect foul play. But after a party unknown tried to spear Shayne while scuba diving off the island, the Miami redhead knew a potential killer was loose .. **2 to 50**

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MUSIC FOR MURDER

The gifted group of young musicians at Castle Cay had everything going for them—success, sex and a multi-million-dollar deal. But a deadly incubus was breeding murder—so Danny Banks put in a call for Mike Shayne.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE LARGE EEL LAY all but motionless in the rich deep blue Gulf water. Only the slight shuddery vibration of its tail revealed that it was not sleeping off a rainbow-hued feast on the smaller sea creatures that eddied around it in swift erratic multitudes.

The snakelike salt-water animal rested close against the broken hull of the half-submerged schooner, less than twenty feet from where the detective stood in borrowed scuba rig. His feet were solidly planted in the bottom sand, some five yards below the sun-dappled surface. On either side of him, water-worn rock outcrops sprouted seaweed the size of small trees, trees whose arms wavered slowly in the gentle current.

The eel remained immobile, unaware of the threat to its life offered by Shayne's spear-gun, peaceable, at rest. All at once, the redhead found himself unable to press the spear-gun trigger. It was, he thought, just a little too *much* like shooting fish in a barrel.

A sudden flurry of motion on

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the part of the milling smaller fish caught his eye as he lowered the weapon undischarged. Where they had been eddying about without apparent direction or purpose, all at once they took off to his left, toward the spritted bow of the half-careened schooner hulk.

The eel ignored their activity, seemingly as beneath its dignity. But the detective, from reflex rather than thought-reaction, looked quickly to the right, seeking the source of their sudden spurt in the opposite direction.

Something slender and swift and bright was flashing toward him through the deep blue Gulf water. Only by flinging himself desperately to one side, a move that caused him to sprawl ingloriously on the rock-strewn bottom, did he avoid being skewered.

As it was, the spear cut a furrow in his bare left deltoid, a furrow that sprouted blood which rose and dissolved lazily in the limpid water that engulfed him.

Shayne lay perfectly still for a long moment, seeking to nail down the eye-corner flash of a masked head and naked shoulder in the act of vanishing behind the stern of the long-wrecked schooner. Then, recalling the attraction of human blood for sharks, he decided to get quickly out of there and back on the beach.

Someone had tried to kill him with a spear gun, here in the warm shallow water just off the golden sands of Castle Cay. What had until then seemed a milk-run assignment had been transformed, within a single second, into a life-and-death case.

With Shayne's own life very apparently at stake.

Since pursuit, thanks to his fall to the sand and the blood he was shedding, seemed entirely impractical, the redhead walked slowly up the Gulf-bottom to the beach. But he did not disarm his spear-gun until he had emerged from the water. Then he removed the scuba apparatus and sat down on the bath towel he had brought from the turreted stone bulk of Castle Cay. He reached for a smaller towel and cleaned the blood from the furrow in his upper left arm.

A quick glance assured him the wound was not serious and he held the towel to it while the blow was staunched. Otherwise, he kept his grey eyes riveted on the water to see who emerged.

"What happened to *you*?"

The voice came from behind and above him, husky, almost gravelled, yet unmistakably female.

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He looked up and around. Swinging, singing Donna Lydell was at his side, long, leggy, dripping wet, naked save for a string bikini, her water-dark hair hanging nearly to her hips.

Shayne lifted the towel and showed her, said, "Merely a passing shark."

Alarm flared in her slanting hazel eyes, to be replaced by disbelief, then by mockery. Strong white teeth flashed in a derisive smile. "Better put something on it," she said. "Otherwise, you'll be one beautiful mess."

She moved to her beach towel a few yards up the sands, rummaged in a white canvas-and-brown-leather bag, produced a half-empty pint of vodka, poured generously on the partially reddened hand towel, replaced it on his ripped deltoid.

"You can get a hell of an infection if you're not careful," she told him.

Shayne thanked her, returning his attention to the water although the vodka stung the furrow in his upper arm. Donna, the ribald, free-spirited rock-pop music queen, had not impressed him as exactly a maternal type. As if to reinforce his misjudgment, moments later, she thrust a lighted cigaret between his lips, an offering he accepted gratefully.

On her knees beside him, her boyish rump resting on her heels, long fingers spread on her thighs, she regarded him curiously, said, "I've been doing my homework, Mike—what, for Christ's sake, is Miami's highest price private eye doing in this peaceful haven of filberts and pistachios?"

"Sweetie," he replied around the cigaret in his mouth, "I'm beginning to wonder that myself."

So his identity was out. *What the hell*, he thought, *it had to come out sometime*. He only wished his anonymity had lasted a little longer—until he had had time to get further acquainted with the intricacies of the scene into which he had allowed himself to be thrust.

Donna seemed to sense his peturbation, said, "Don't worry, super-shamus—I found out on my own and I'm not broadcasting—yet."

He flashed another quick look at her as the sting of alcohol subsided, said, "Is that a threat—or a promise?"

"Read it your way," she replied.

Shayne returned his attention to the water as a pair of dripping figures emerged from it—plump, chubby Aura Nymo, the pianist-composer–occasional

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singer, and blue-black skinned Slam Barrett, electronics wizard with the long lank limbs and body of a professional basketball forward. Aura carried her scuba mask and a baby bluefish. Slam held two speargunns under his left arm and a single silvery shaft. A second protruded from the bluefish.

Unlikely either of them fired at me, the redhead thought as they came closer, *unless someone was carrying a spare.*

Despite the not unpleasing compact roundness of her short body, Aura Nymo projected an air of abstraction—as if she were somewhere else. Not for the first time in the scant thirty-six hours he had known her, Mike Shayne wondered what it took to bring her back into the here and now—or if she had ever been there.

She said to no one in particular, "Where's Danny?"

"Still locked in his study with the visiting firemen," Donna Lydell replied, added, "for all I know."

"I've got to talk to him." There was urgency in Aura's near-mouse voice, urgency reflected in the furrow of her low domed forehead.

"Rots of ruck." Donna sounded derisive.

Aura paused to look at her briefly, then at Shayne, then at no one in particular. "It's not like it used to be, Danny's not with it any more—not with *us*, anyway. It's not fun any more—you know?"

Donna said, "Just keep concentrating on all that lovely money, darling, and maybe you won't miss Danny so much while he's getting it together for all of us."

"I wish I could be sure of that. . ." Aura sounded vaguer still. She hesitated, added, "Where's Lud?"

"Still in the shack as far as I know," Donna replied.

Aura wandered off toward the low point a hundred yards distant, disappeared shortly around a low grass-tipped dune.

Staring after her," tall Slam Barrett said, "She's right, you know. Things aren't the same."

"Are they ever?" Donna countered.

"You know what I mean." The towering black techinician bent like a folding tent pole to scoop up from his blanket a pair of large black shades and a pocket radio which immediately began blasting a disc jockey's countdown of the Top Forty.

Shayne removed the towel from his upper left arm, discovered that the gash had stopped bleeding. Apart from a slight stiffness, which promised to get worse overnight, the arm felt okay.

Slam Barrett said, "What

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happened to your arm, man?" calling from the beach blanket on which he had stretched his near-seven-foot frame.

"Piranha," said the detective.

"Yeah?" Slam's reply sounded more than dubious. Then, "Better put something on it, you know. . . "

"I already did," Donna assured the black. "With twenty-four-hour nursing, he might pull through."

"You planning to be the nurse?" Slam countered.

"That's entirely up to Mike." Donna actually sounded demure—no small achievement, the redhead thought, considering the wordliness of her tilted hazel eyes, the cynical twist of her wide thin sensual mouth.

Another female figure emerged from the water. This one was midway between Aura and Donna in height—say five five—and plumper than the smaller girl. Folds of fat virtually concealed the nether portion of her tan bikini, giving her a nude appearance belied only by the bra which partially supported pendulous breasts.

"Hi, what's cooking, kids?" she asked after removing her breathing gear and transparent face mask. Her voice had a bouncy lilt to it.

"You will be, Toni, if you can't keep away from the cannibals," Slam Barrett assured her.

"Sweets to the sweet," Toni Johns said.

"I was thinking pot to the pot," the big black replied.

The fat girl rushed at him, brandishing her fish-spearing

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apparatus in either real or mock temper, Shayne could not be sure which. Sitting up, Slam disarmed her, tossing the spear to the sand, then pulled the girl down across his thighs and proceeded to give her a thwack with the flat of his hand that sounded like a rifle shot.

The detective tensed to go to her rescue but Donna laid a restraining hand on his uninjured right shoulder and said, low-voiced, "Leave them alone. Toni digs it."

Sensing that Donna was right, Shayne shrugged and relaxed. He was more concerned with the fact that the fat girl's spear-gun contained no shaft. He wondered what had happened to it. Was it the shaft that had so narrowly missed a certain Mike Shayne mere minutes before?

He couldn't help wondering. Nor could he help wondering what sort of a cuckoo's nest the Castle Cay assignment had dropped him into.

II

MIKE SHAYNE HAD BEEN seated alone in his Flagler Street office two afternoons earlier when the call from Loren Howard came in. For the first time in months, the redhead was at an absolute loose end. Feet on his desk as bright afternoon sunlight moved with infinitesimal slowness across the wall on his left, he had been debating with himself whether to dig the brandy bottle out of the lower file drawer and enjoy a solitary libation, or to hoist his rear from the chair and seek early convivial companionsip at The Beef House or some less favored bistro.

But Tim Rourke, his favorite drinking companion, was on assigment to cover a satellite launching at Cape Canaveral, while Lucy Hamilton, his longtime secretary and favorite female, was in Tampa, visiting an ailing aunt. The detective had just wound up a difficult if profitable case and thus was at his absolute loose end.

It was then that the desk phone rang.

Loren Howard had not sounded urgent. The semi-retired millionaire-sportsman was a long-time occasional deep-sea fishing companion for whom, five months earlier, Shayne had managed to untangle a complicated involvement with a lissom Chicago divorcée whose appetite for the male sex was outmatched only by her matching desire for blackmail.

He said, "Mike, I suppose you're up to your ears as usual."

"You suppose wrong," the

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redhead replied. "What have you got in mind?"

"It's not much," the millionaire replied. "Just guarding a body. But it pays well."

"Is the body alive or dead?"

"Very much alive to date," Howard told him. "Why don't you come over and find out for yourself if you've nothing better to do?"

There, on the flagged patio of Loren Howard's Bal Harbour estate, over a long frosted mint julep–built upon forty-year-old 100-proof bourbon, Shayne met Danny Banks.

His first impression of the pop-rock music panjandrum of *Vector Recordings* was of a teen-age juvenile delinquent. Banks was tiny, a he-sprite in a blue denim leisure suit whose adornment made it resemble a patchwork quilt. His face was homely to ugly, his dark hair looked is if it were trying to work its way out of a mattress.

But Danny's light blue eyes were alive with intelligence, his voice electric, his language articulate. Even in apparently casual greeting, the detective felt himself being weighed, analyzed, computed, judged.

Within a span of two minutes, Danny Banks turned to Loren Howard, said, "Thanks, sweetheart—he'll do."

During the passage of three more minutes, Shayne learned the following—that Danny Banks was in the throes of consummating at multimillion-dollar deal, that Loren Howard was involved as a part-backer, that Banks was sitting on a madhouse located in a semi-restored boom time millionaire's "Castle" just off the Gulf coast and that his personal assistant, one Matt Kovacks, had disappeared three days earlier.

Swift, incisive, to the point. After Banks had laid it out, Loren Howard added, "If you have the time, I'd appreciate your doing it, Mike. There's a good deal at stake."

"Five bills a day," Banks put in. "Most of the time you'll be having a ball. I've got the whole team on the island for the duration."

"The duration of what?" the redhead asked.

"This damned deal. I want to deliver my complete stable to Galvanic when the papers are signed."

Shayne took a long luscious pull on his drink, then said, "Any idea why Kovacks pulled out?"

The younger man flipped his hands like a perplexed sea lion. "Matt had been growling about riding herd on a bunch of juvenile delinquent geniuses too long. He was an ulcer type. He threatened to pull out for a

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long time. I guess he just did."

"Why do you need a bodyguard?" the detective inquired.

"I can handle the kids," Danny Banks replied. "The problem is, I can't be everywhere at once all the time. I need somebody else. You'll be great. You can be a vice president if you want to."

"Let me take it under advisement." In spite of himself, the detective was fascinated by this brilliant youth—although the tiny crowsfeet at the corners of his eyes, the brief lines around his lips, belied the teenage image.

"There's not too much time," Banks told him. "I've got to be back at Castle Cay for a taping by nine. The copter is waiting."

Shayne took another deliberate pull at his julep. Banks radiated an aura of urgency seemingly greater than the occasion demanded. It occurred to the detective that the young impressario was one of those human dynamoes that operated always with personal throttle wide open.

He said, "Banks—"

"Call me Danny—everybody does."

"Okay, Danny, have you heard from Kovacks since he took off?"

The young impressario shook his head, then a frown added vertical lines between his eyebrows. "Not a word—but Matt isn't the kind who would. Still. . ." Banks hesitated.

"Still, what?" The redhead pushed it.

"It's just that he left his stuff behind—along with a lot of unfinished business. Its not typical."

Mike Shayne digested this, turned to Loren Howard, said, "How deep are you in this deal?"

The millionaire sportsman shrugged, said, "Plenty, Mike. Not that I'm worried. . ."

The detective's grey eyes studied their host, read the concern that lay behind the denial of concern. Turning back to Banks, he said quietly, "Okay, Banks, you're on. Since you're in a hurry, I'll go home now and pack a bag. Where shall I meet you?"

Again, the radiance of a smile—the smile of a small boy who has just been promised a pony for Christmas. A small hand, wirily strong for all of its size, gripped Shayne's.

"Glad to have you aboard!" Danny Banks spoke with sincerity.

It was already dark when the helicopter put down on a graveled parking area at the rear of the castle, which loomed against the star-bright sapphire sky like a battlemented mediaeval prison fortress on its

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ten-acre island off the Florida west coast. Danny Banks, who had piloted from Miami, taxied the craft into a well lighted temporary hangar.

There, the detective found himself looking upward at the ebon countenance of Slam Barrett for the first time. After a casual Slam-Mike introduction —Banks had suggested using the detective's first name to avoid too-rapid recognition by anyone else on the cay—the entrepreneur said, "You close up here, if you will Slam. I'll show Mike to his room."
room."

He led the redhead up two flights, along a corridor, opened a door, said, "You're in here, Mike. Make yourself comfortable. This is where Matt slept."

He reached inside, turned on a light switch, added, "Come on downstairs whenever you're ready. We eat buffet style at Castle Cay, there's no regular meal time."

Then the tiny figure was gone.

Mike entered his quarters. The room was huge and all but circular, occupying, he judged, a floor of one of the corner turrets of the castle. To his left, a half-open door revealed a dressing area with a bathroom beyond. But at the moment, the redhead paid these appurtenances little heed.

The bed, which was emperor sized, caught his attention at once—not the bed so much as the leggy young woman who sat up upon it, blinking against the light and rubbing her eyes. Save for the long brown hair that concealed much of her lean but definitely female body, she was nude.

"Who in hell turned on the lights?" she said crossly. "I was just getting to sleep." Then, squinting at the detective. "Oh. . . !" Then, with a smile, "I'm Donna. Who are you?"

"Mike," he said. "I just got here."

"So what else is old?" Her brief smile was laced with mockery. Swinging her long legs over the side of the bed, she reached for a pair of wispy garments, wrinkled her nose, added, "I'm out of my skull about big beds. The bigger the better. See you downstairs, Mike."

With that, she strode from the room with angular grace, the twin dimples in her bare behind saluting him as she departed.

Shayne felt fugitive guilt at the thought of Lucy Hamilton, maiden-aunt visiting in Tampa. He hoped she would never find out about this facet of his unexpected assignment.

He concentrated briefly upon Donna, on what he had seen of

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her face, upon her throaty, husky voice. A couple of memory gongs rang faintly, then more clearly as he brought them into focus. Donna, Donna, Donna—Donna Lydell—he had seen and heard her recently on one of the TV shows, Mike Douglas or maybe Dinah.

He had found her provocative, had liked her—Lucy had found her bitchy, had not liked. To hell, he thought, with Lucy, adding a qualifying *at least for the time being.*

Unpacking, Shayne closed the door and looked around for a place to park his Colt .45, with shoulder rig and extra clips. There was little point in advertising the fact that he had come armed. He canvassed the bedroom, the dressing room with its sliding-door closets, the bath, spotted a ventilator screen above the john.

It pulled out easily, once he had turned a pair of movable brackets that secured it. Placing it against the wash basin, he moved to stow his weapon and ammunition inside, then stopped dead.

Another handgun, a Smith & Wesson .38 automatic, lay just within the ventilator, complete with shoulder holster. Beside it were a pair of 50-cartridge containers.

The redhead drew out the gun and holster, looked at them, noted the fine workmanship of both, the initials of ivory set in the butt of the pistol.

They read M.K.—Matt Kovacks, he presumed.

From then on, his neck hairs remained at the prickle. But nothing else suspicious occurred until the unknown party tried to skewer him with a fish spear late in the morning of the second day after his arrival.

It was time, Shayne thought as he donned slacks and a red-and-grey sports shirt, that he had a private talk with Danny Banks.

III

DURING THE APPROXIMATE forty-eight hours of his employment, Shayne had seen his employer only twice. Once emerging from the water through a mullioned window in the castle, once leaving the long refectory dining room, munching a barbecued chicken leg as the redhead entered.

Neither occasion had offered opportunity for conversation, casual or pertinent.

Not that the detective had occasion for complaint. He was comfortably, even luxuriously, housed, the food and drink were ample and excellent, the work thus far virtually non-existent. Each of his two mornings on

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the Cay, Shayne had come downstairs from the round tower bedroom to discover a single envelope in the pigeonhole assigned him in the great, echoing fron hall.

Each envelope had contained five hundred-dollar bills, crisp, new and folded inside a sheet of stationery bearing a *Vector Enterprises* head.

No complaints—Shayne was more concerned with a survival problem. . .his own. The underwater assault earlier that morning had set alarm bells ringing. Usually, when someone was after him, the detective had at least a fair working idea of why and whence he was being attacked.

This time, he had not an inkling. Nor had he the slightest clue as to the fate of his predecessor, Matt Kovacks. Something was going to have to be done on both fronts.

Althea Grayson, a some-time singer, full-time Girl Friday, looking like a blonde owl behind her pale rimmed granny-glasses, was sitting in the anteroom of the "executive wing", her bare feet resting on the desk blotter in front of her. She regarded the redhead without moving save to wave a T-shirted arm toward a door behind her and to her left.

"He's in there," she said, her feet still on the blotter.

As he passed Althea, she extended a foot and flipped a switch on one of the battery of electronic devices barricading the desk-top around the rim of the blotter. Her toenails were enameled Nile green, her legs Daisy Mae sensational.

Mike Shayne rapped on the black walnut door, got a, "Come in," entered. Casual, he thought, was the word for *Vector Enterprises* as conducted by Danny Banks on Castle Cay. Casual to the point of utter disorientation.

The tiny entrepreneur lay on his back atop pale leather cushions in a gigantic window seat. He waved a greeting at the redhead, said, "Glad you're here, Mike, "re-introduced him to the two other men present—balding, burly, immaculately tailored Aaron Silver and a lean sallow ulcer type Shayne knew as Carl Winters. Mike had met them the day before at lunch when Danny introduced him as Matt Kovacks' replacement.

"The Galvanic boys," Banks added as if it explained everything.

It took Shayne a moment to recall that the half-pint entrepreneur had mentioned two evenings earlier at Loren Howard's that he was in the act of selling his *complete stable* to something called *Galvanic*. During his

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brief stay on the tiny island, the detective had derived a distinct impression that there was some unrest on the part of the stable horses at the prospect of being thus peddled.

In his mind's ear, the redhead could hear Aura Nymo's celebrated voice complaining, "Danny's not with it any more—not with us, anyway. . ."

As Shayne followed his employer's nodded direction toward a red morocco leather sofa beneath a Leger still life on the far wall, Aaron Silver voiced parallel concern with, "Sure, Galvanic will meet your price—but only if we have assurance Vector's performers will continue to deliver. Can you give us that assurance in black and white, Danny?"

Banks sat up, spread his hands, regarded the two older men incredulously. "You doubt my word?" he countered.

Silver hedged. "I didn't say that. . ." He hesitated.

Carl Winters suppressed a burp, said, "T-try to understand our point of view, Danny. After all. . ." It was his turn to let it hang.

But I *do* understand—I understand perfectly." Although Shayne knew his employer only recently and slightly, he derived a distinct impression that the impish entrepreneur was cutting figure eights around these middle-aged and presumably able business executives. While the elfin face was solemn, there was a gleam of amusement in the light blue eyes.

Danny's slight body leaned forward in the window seat as he said softly, "What assurance does Galvanic demand?"

The two older men exchanged a glance. Aaron Silver ran a forefinger inside his tight raspberry shirt collar. He said, "Understand, Danny, Galvanic *demands* nothing. But there *have* been rumbles. And we *are* dealing with highly temperamental product."

"All right, Aaron—let's have it," said Danny Banks. "What's the joker in your deck?"

"*You* are." Carl Winters' voice was softly emphatic. "We know you can control them. In return for the investment we're recommending and the tremendous enlargement of exploitation facilities Galvanic is willing to offer, we must have assurance the product will continue to deliver."

Danny let his short legs dangle from the windowseat, cocked his disheveled dark head, said, "And in return for such assurance. . . ?"

The two executives exchanged a long glance, then Silver picked up the ball. His barrel chest expanded beneath

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its raspberry broadcloth covering. He said, "Twelve months of availability on twenty-four-hour call."

"For. . .?" The youthful entrepreneur let it dangle there between them.

Aaron Silver took another deep breath, glanced at Carl Winters, then back at Danny Banks. "One hundred thousand dollars per month."

To Shayne's amazement, Danny shook his head, said, "Hey, fellows, the only reason I got into this deal was to get the operation off my back. I've been wet nursing these kids for over five years now, giving them thirty-six hours a day, wiping their noses, letting them cry on my shoulder, mixing their sound, tucking them in bed, fighting their battles on four continents. . .you know, the whole gruesome bit."

He shook his head, said, "I've got to get out, go somewhere rock has never been heard of, lie on my backside. I've got to forget the whole loving schmier before the doc puts a pacemaker inside my chest. I'm sorry, fellows—it's a hell of an offer, but it's no deal."

Silver's flush deepened. Winters burped again, put a hand flat against his chest to calm the turmoil within. Danny glanced at Mike Shayne and, to the detective's amazement,

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winked with the eye away from the executives.

"*Jesus,* Danny!" Silver gasped. "You're not going to do this to us now? It's our *heads*!"

The tiny entrepreneur suddenly smiled, seeming to light the room. He said, "Fellows, I thought you knew me better than that. And you know a million-two is not enough. Hell, I can make five times that just lying on my bottom on a Tahiti beach in a year."

"I'm sorry, Danny. But it's as high as we can go."

"You think *I* didn't foresee this?" Banks countered. "You think I don't know what the kids are saying? How they feel?" He slid his feet to the floor, leaned against the windowseat. "You think I haven't been doing my homework?"

The visitors looked at each other, baffled. Danny Banks said, "I've got two years of tape ahead by everybody—Aura Nymo doing Lud Soule ballads with and without him, Donna in her own inimitable songs with and without backing, Lud on solos, Tony Johns kicking hell out of all the standards, Monk's Monkeys on a whole new jungle kick, you name it. . .one hundred and twenty tapes Galvanic can run solo or mix with any b.g. they want."

A pause, then, "You won't be needing *me,* fellows"

The visitors exchanged another glance. This time Carl Winters picked it up. "I don't suppose you're throwing this in for free, Danny?"

"You don't suppose right, Carl. The price is two-four and a giveaway. Work out a payment schedule with my accountant and it's a deal."

"We'll want to hear the tapes first," said Aaron Silver.

"Althea will take you to a studio," Danny assured him. "Slam will stand by to answer any technical questions. Okay?"

They nodded, turned toward the door. Neither of them bade farewell to Shayne. He had an idea they were no longer aware of his presence.

"Good listening, fellows," the little entrepreneur called after them. When they were gone, he grinned at Shayne like a gamin, said, "Howsit, Mike? What can I do for *you?*"

The detective told him about finding Matt Kovacks' handgun in the bathroom ventilator, about the attempt in the water on his own life.

Danny Banks listened thoughtfully, said, "Any idea who sniped at you?"

Shayne shook his head, said, "How *could* I? I don't even know which way is down around here, much less up."

Banks exhaled through his lips, fluttering them rather like

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a pony nickering. He said, "I don't know about you, Mike, but I'm hungry. It's been a long morning. How about it?"

Since the underwater incident, the detective had not had opportunity to think of his stomach. He was famished, having skipped breakfast. As they walked toward the dining hall, he said, "Danny, don't you keep any records of your business conversations? You were tossing millions around. . ."

"Come out of the Dark Ages, Mike," Danny replied. "That room was not only taped, it was microfilmed. Althea may look like a hillbilly but she can make magic of those gadgets on her desk with her toes. She has it all on record."

Shayne looked around as they entered the refectory dining room. "Where are the Galvanic boys?" he asked.

"I'll have something sent down to them," Banks told him. "They'll be listening to those tapes till midnight."

IV

BEFORE VISITING THE refectory for lunch, Shayne and Danny went up to the detective's room to take a look at the vanished Matt Kovacks' Smith & Wesson. The gun was still there behind the ventilator above the john, as was the redhead's heavier .45. Neither weapon had been disturbed, nor had the boxes of extra ammo.

Danny's aura of spriteliness vanished as he studied the pistols with narrowed eyes. He said, "Mike, I don't like this. Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

He led the way back to the bedroom, sat on the edge of the big bed, his fingers locked on his narrow lap.

Following, Shayne said, "When the hell did you give me a chance?"

The light blue eyes bored into the redhead's grey ones. Then the entrepreneur spread his hands, smiled ruefully. He said, "I know, Mike. I've been churning like a Mixmaster. Sorry."

"It's okay. I'll keep you better informed regardless."

"*Do* that—you have twenty-four-hour entrée." Danny's smile faded, his eyes burned with intensity. "Mike, I'm piling another job on you—find out what happened to Matt Kovacks."

"Top priority?" the detective inquired.

"Top priority!" A pause, then Banks bounced to his feet. "Come on—let's eat. I want to see what the kiddies are up to."

"Go ahead," Shayne told him. "I'll get the ball rolling. See you downstairs."

"Good man, Mike." Danny

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moved toward the bedroom door. There he turned, said, "Keep me with it."

"One thing," said the redhead. "Was Kovacks from Miami?"

Banks shook his head, said, "I picked him up in L.A. when I was just getting Vector off the ground. He was a former Marine sergeant, working as a private op. I needed somebody to keep order around the shop. Let's see—" a pause while his brow wrinkled "—Donna brought him in."

A smile, then, "She said she dug his walrus mustache. A symbol of revolt from the Corps—something like that. It's a dandy."

"I've got friends in the Corps," Shayne told him.

"Will that help find Matt?" the half-pint young millionaire asked.

"You never know," the redhead assured him.

Alone, the detective returned to the bathroom, plucked a hair from his head and fitted the grid back in its place above the john. . .carefully wedging a hair inside the top of the grid frame. If anyone else removed it, the hair would be dislodged.

Feeling a few millimeters more secure, Shayne returned to the bedroom and picked up the phone. A rich contralto adrip with magnolia blossoms said, "Anythin' you want, tall, red and handsome—anythin' *at all?*"

Shayne smiled, said, "Sorry, Althea, only a little old outside line."

"You recognized my voice?" The magnolia blossoms vanished.

"Anywhere, magic toes," he replied.

"My God, you *are* quick!"

She gave him the line and he dialed a Miami number. After a couple of minutes, he got through to a long-time acquaintance, Commander Allan Gibbs, U.S. Naval Intelligence, told him he wanted a make on former Marine Sergeant Matt Kovacks.

"Anything special, Mike?" Gibbs countered.

"Don't know yet," Shayne replied.

"Where can I reach you?"

Shayne told him and Gibbs said, "You lucky bastard! How are they biting?"

"Don't know yet."

"Christ, but you're an informative S.O.B.!" Gibbs said with a mixture of good nature and annoyance. Then, "I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Make it sooner, Allan. From this end, Kovacks seems to have disappeared."

"*Jesus!* Something wrong?"

"Don't know yet—thanks." Shayne hung up.

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When Shayne got downstairs, Danny Banks was in the process of leaving the dining room with a quartet of bearded blacks who made the entrepreneur look like a minnow in a tank full of dark dolphins. Danny waved a half-eaten chicken leg at him, called across the big refectory, "See you later. Gotta rehearsal."

As he moved toward the buffet table, Shayne wondered if his employer subsisted on anything but drumsticks.

Picking up a tray and tableware, the redhead looked over the display of foods offered the denizens of Castle Cay. As befitted a small operation with profits running in the millions annually, the layout was varied and lavish.

For openers, there were ice-packed displays of deviled eggs with anchovies, large and small sardines in tomato sauce and olive oil respectively, artichoke hearts in a nest of shredded lettuce with a choice of oils and dressings, a bowl of buckshot sized grey beluga caviar—plus two steaming sunken containers of rich soup, a thick chicken gumbo and an even thicker crabmeat bisque rich with tomatoes and celery and red and green peppers.

For entrées, there were well warmed pompano steaks, a rich looking, gold crusted Cornish pasty composed of thickly cubed chicken—also a container of barbecued fowl, brown and hot in a bed of Spanish rice—along with cottage-fried potatoes, string beans and thick spears of asparagus.

For dessert, there were large, custard-rich glazed fruit tarts of cartwheel size and a fruit salad that looked magnificently fresh—plus well used layer cakes, chocolate, lemon and fluffy white.

A newly familiar voice at his elboy said, "What I wouldn't give for a plain old pizza and pepperoni!"

Shayne glanced at Donna, leggier than ever in patched denim slacks and a halter that featured stitched-on pink fingers caressing each small breast. He said, "What I wouldn't give for a two-inch-thick sirloin steak!"

Donna and the detective settled for pompano and the Cornish pasty respectively and she led the way to a small wall table with a picture-window view of the Gulf. There, before eating, she lit a cigaret, exhaled twin ribbons of smoke, said, "How's it coming, supershamus?"

He lit up himself, said, "I'm still trying to get the batting order straight."

"Pecking order would be more like it," she countered.

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"This place may look like Anarchy Hall, but take it from a bottle-scarred veteran, it's got more levels than a seven-layer cake."

"Where do you rate on the ladder?" Shayne asked her over his smoke.

She half-closed an eye, cocked her head slightly, said, "Don't worry. I cope. Right now, though, Aura Nymo's slipping off the top rung and scrambling to hang on, Toni Johns—she's the fat little bitch who likes to have her bottom paddled—is on the way up, the others swinging lower."

"And you?"

She wrinkled her freckle-dusted nose. "Me? I keep to one side. I do my own thing and stay off the beaten paths. I may not get as rich that way, but I do all right and nobody crowds me. Nobody'd better!"

Shayne digested this with a mouthful of pasty. Donna Lydell was smart, shrewd, intelligent—and tough. He wondered if they could use each other in whatever developed here on Castle Cay. He knew better than to think for a moment he could use her without being used in return.

He said, "What do you want from me, Donna?"

She laid down her cigaret, picked up her fork, intoned, "It's not what your shamus can do for you, it's what you can do for your shamus."

He studied her, said, "You're worried—maybe frightened. Oh, don't mind, you don't show it. But you wouldn't be hanging around me if you weren't."

She said, "Right on, super-shamus." A pause, then, "The hell of it is, I don't really know why I'm worried or what I'm scared of. It's a gut feeling that won't go 'way."

"Try spelling it out," Shayne suggested.

"For starters, Mike, what's happened to Matt Kovacks? He didn't tell me he was leaving. He was up to his elbows in Danny's big deal. Then, five days ago, he's gone—just like *that!*" She snapped her fingers.

"Then there's the deal. We're going along, everybody getting rich and feeling good about what's happening—and then it's all changed and nobody knows why. Nobody but Danny. Why in hell is he selling us out? Without him, everybody and everything falls apart. It stinks. It's not Danny. He's the captain of this crazy ship, and he makes it run true. Everybody's uptight about it."

"You, too."

"Me, too." She nodded. "Maybe not like some of the others. I was never on the hard stuff and I always handled my booze and sex okay. But some

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of the kids—hell, most of them—were down the drain before Danny picked them up. Now. . . " She shrugged her thin shoulders, added, "Somehow, with Danny, we all feel comfortable—safe. He knows it. We've delivered for him. So why is he letting us down, selling us out?"

"Maybe he has to," Mike Shayne suggested. "Maybe Galvanic is simply too big."

"Bullchips!" Donna snorted. "Not for Danny. *Oh*-oh. . ."

A sudden outburst of violence caused the detective to turn quickly to look toward the center of the big baronial dining room.

The chubby little singer named Aura Nymo had smashed a tumbler and was trying to thrust the jagged bottom portion into the face of the far plumper Toni Johns, who had grabbed a small platter and was using it as a shield. Obscenities further shattered the relative quiet, and a chair was overturned as a sun-streaked young man with a large gut overhanging the shorts that were his only garment made a move to undervene.

"I think," Mike Shayne said softly, "this is where I come in."

V

MOVING WITH PANTHERINE grace

that belied the swiftness of his approach, Mike Shayne got into the scene unobserved by its trio of frantic performers. Just as Aura made a thrust with her jagged weapon at the overhanging belly of the sunstreaked peacemaker, the detective used

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his left hand to grip the little singer's long auburn hair close to the roots from behind, jerking her backward and off her feet.

With his right hand, reaching from behind, he grasped her right wrist and, twisting it sharply, caused her to drop the broken tumbler, which fell with a thud to the linoleum covered refectory floor.

Aura wriggled frantically in silent struggle for freedom, then relaxed in sobbing defeat. After kicking the glass under an adjacent table, the redhead let her go.

It was a mistake. The little singer turned on him like an enraged terrier, literally leaping at him with fingers clawed, seeking to tear the flesh off his face, screaming obscenities.

Shayne retreated, fending her off until he got a chance to bring one of his sandaled heels down hard on her bare left instep, causing her to crumple in gasping agony, gripping her foot with both hands as she sat on the floor with tears steaming down her sundusked face.

"Fascist bastard!" was the gentlest thing she called him when she regained the power of speech.

The sunstreaked young man with the overhanging gut stepped in, thanked the detective, added, "When Aura blows her top, she's Krakatao." Then, with sympathy as he stooped to help her to her feet, "Come on, pug-dog, it's okay."

Her berserk rage vanished, the still sobbing Aura cast a sidelong glance at the detective as she was hoisted upright, then did a double take, said, "Oh—you're the new bodyguard."

Shayne nodded, turned his attention to plump Toni Johns, who had resumed her place at the table and was shoveling forkfuls of the rich pasty into her fat-furrowed face.

Through a well-filled mouth, Toni said, "I'm okay—thanks, Mike."

The redhead felt like a deflated balloon. His adrenals were up, triggered by the sudden, if harmless, violence, were unprepared for the equally sudden calmness of aftermath. He glanced at Aura, who was being led from the room by the fat young man, then returned to his own table.

Donna Lydell lifted an eyebrow, said, "Do you enjoy fighting females, shamus?"

Shayne pondered the question briefly while he loaded his fork with pasty, then said, "On the whole, I think I enjoy fighting females rather than males. They're prettier."

Donna put back her head and laughed, a free uninhibited dis-

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play of genuine amusement in sharp contrast to her previous aura of guarded self-control. Then, laying a firm hand on his wrist, "Mike, you're a man after my own heart."

The redhead replied, "Only if I think I have a fair chance of getting it."

The hazel eyes widened, then narrowed. She said, "*Eat,* shamus—and that's an order."

He was still at it when he sensed he and Donna were not alone at the table. Looking up, he discovered himself regarding the navel eye in the center of the sunstreaked young man's overhanging gut.

"I'm Lud," said the newcomer. "Thanks for putting Aura down. She gets kind of crazy sometimes."

"*Kind* of!" Donna murmured.

"Shut *up,* Donna," said Lud. "Aura can't help it."

"What teed her off?" Shayne said.

"I can tell you that," Donna interposed. "Toni said something about Aura cashing in on the big sellout and leaving the rest of the gang up the creek. Am I right, Lud, baby?"

"Close enough," the fat man replied. Then, to the detective, "Why haven't you come to the shack?"

"Nobody's asked me," Shayne replied. "Should I?"

"I think you should," Lud told him. "That is, if you've got Matt's old job."

Donna begged off, pleading work on a new lyric. Thus, a few minutes later, the redhead found himself strolling up the beach with Lud toward the low dune a hundred yards north of the castle. As he walked, he recalled Danny Banks including the name of *Lud Soule* in his list of tapes to which the *Galvanic* officers were presumably then listening.

They skirted the low dune and Shayne found himself looking at what must have begun life as a boathouse. Architecturally, it was a small replica of the castle itself, complete with tiny corner turrets and narrow pointed Gothic windows.

During the long years of the cay's abandonment, Gulf currents had built out the beach until the boathouse was at least a hundred yards from the water at whose former edge it had been reared. Unlike, the main building, it had not been restored. Turrets were chipped, eaves sagged, its roof offered a mosaic pattern of missing tiles.

Music seeped from it, becoming louder as Shayne and Lud Soule approached—the pounding beat of hard rock, interspersed with the shrill yipping voice-tones that are a component part of latter-day

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jazz. The large room that occupied most of the interior was twilight dark in the bright afternoon, making visibility difficult at first for the Miami redhead.

The unforgettable acrid smell of marijuana stung Shayne's nostrils as he took his first breath.

The well policed neatness of the castle was non-existent here in the so-called shack. Inside, it was a jumble of dim rickety lamps, of mattresses on the floor, of bottles vertical and horizontal, of soft-drink cans, of stereo equipment.

Their refectory tiff apparently forgotten, Aura Nymo and Toni Johns were the shack's sole occupants. The smaller girl half-reclined on a mattress, her eyes closed, a joint in her hand, as she listened to the pounding tones that made conversation impossible. Fat Toni sat on a mattress with her legs folded under her, looking in her bikini like a she-Buddha with an opened soft-drink tin in her left hand.

Unable to be heard below a shout, Lud gestured toward the row of bottles and plastic tumblers on a plank bar set up on twin sawhorses. Shayne nodded, glanced at the array, poured himself a straight bourbon in the absence of brandy. Joining him, Lud pulled a can of beer from a plastic ice bucket, ripped off the top.

Thus equipped, he lifted his drink in a silent toast the redhead acknowledged in kind.

Thanks to the protective coloring of Lud's deep tan, the detective had at first thought obesity was his host's chief physical problem. During the walk from Castle to boathouse, however, the redhead had noted the deep face-flush under the tan, the broken blood vessels, the faded look of what must originally have been bright blue eyes.

Shayne had seen the symptoms all too often in the past ten years—the premature aging of casualties of the counter-culture, the breakdown of youthful tissues under the influence of hard narcotics, an ugly senescence that persisted even after the cause was cured.

Lud Soule? Again memory stirred. Shayne recalled it as a brief teenager household name during the Sixties, the name of a pop music phenomenon who had flashed brilliantly across that frenetic scene with a poetic imagery that was, in its heyday, acclaimed as more than pop. Until Danny Banks mentioned the name earlier that morning, the detective had not heard it in at least a half dozen years.

Which meant nothing, since

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Shayne had never been sensitive to the ever-changing patterns of that scene. He himself, where pop music was concerned, was early Irving Berlin, in jazz barely Mouldy Fig.

For all he knew, Lud Soule might have flourished mightily underground or behind the scenes. Whatever. . .in any event, the detective judged, Lud had not long to live.

When the cassette ended and quiet was restored, Lud said, "We want to know where you stand, Mike. We're the old guard here, Aura, Toni and I. We're the ones Danny started with. We're the ones who made him rich."

The redhead lit a cigaret, said, "And you're against the deal with Galvanic?"

"That's right," said Lud in his soft voice.

"That's right," Aura Nymo echoed.

"That's a lot of bull-chips!" Toni snorted.

"You're getting as bad as Donna," Aura told her. "All you want is the bread."

"That's *right!*" The fat girl's grin put a rash of dimples in her face. "Why don't you face facts, Aura? Danny's washed up with you. And that's your own fault, always running off to Pakistan or wherever to practice deep breathing with some goofy guru. Dont blame him."

"Lay off Aura," said Lud. "After all, she carried the whole pack for three years."

"Yeah?" The fat girl's query was corrosive. "So what has she done lately? She hasn't hit the Top Twenty in eight months. If anybody should settle for the loot she'll be getting when the deal's signed, it's Aura baby."

"But we're losing Danny," Aura wailed. "Without him, I'm nothing."

"*You* lost him a year ago,"

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Toni snorted. "Face reality."

"You don't understand—I *love* him," Aura cried in her thin female quarterback's cutting voice.

"Love, schmov," said the fat girl.

For a tense moment, Shayne thought the battle scene of the refectory was going to be repeated. To break the tension, he said, "Okay—did you bring me here to tell me that?"

"No, Mike," said Lud Soule. "We want to know where you stand."

"Let's put it this way," said the redhead. "Danny is paying my salary."

"He was paying Matt Kovacks' salary," said Lud. "And look what happened to him."

VI

"OKAY, LUD," Mike Shayne said. "What did happen to Kovacks?"

There was silence. The other three looked at one another with expressions the detective found unreadable. Then Lud Soule said, "We don't know. But he was Danny's man and he sure as hell hasn't been around lately. When you showed up, we figured Matt had flown the coop."

"Is that so bad?" the detective countered. He was about to give Aura and Lud a piece of his mind—that they were only revealing how spoiled they were in seeking to block a deal that would make them all millionaires at so early an age. Then it occurred to him that, in the modern mad pop music scene, they had probably all earned millions at an even earlier age. He shut up.

Toni said, "I don't think Mike likes us very much. He thinks we're a bunch of spoiled-rotten kids. Right, Mike?"

"Let's say the thought had entered my head." Shayne smiled, got answering smiles, felt tension abate. He added, "I'd give a lot to know what did happen to Mat Kovacks."

He could feel the tension mount again. It was fat Toni Johns who said, "Don't you know, Mike?"

"How would I? I wasn't around when it happened," Shayne replied. "*If* anything happened."

"Let's leave it at that," said Lud Soule. "Another drink, Mike?"

Shayne refused. He was about to leave when the telephone sounded. Aura dived for it, her face alight with anticipation. When she answered with a bright, "Hello," her expression faded. Almost sullen, she handed it to the redhead, said, "For you."

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Clear pseudo-British accents said, "Mr. Shayne? I have a message from Commander Gibbs in Tampa. He says to knock him up in the morning."

Shayne suppressed a snort of laughter, said, "Thanks, Althea. I'll call him then."

"Aw, *hell!*" said Althea in her normal tones. "Isn't there any *way* I can fool you, Mike?"

"I can think of a couple without half trying," he replied.

"I wasn't thinking of that," the super-operator replied, added, "But at least it's an idea. How about cocktails on the terrace for a starter?"

"Where's the terrace?" Shayne countered.

"I'll think of one, never fear," she said. "I'll pick you up in your room around seven. Okay?"

"Okay," he said. The ubiquitous Althea, it occurred to him, might well prove a fount of information as to what was actually going on at Castle Cay. Certainly, she had the tiny island's communications at her fingertips—anyway, at the tips of her long green toenails.

Putting the handset back in its cradle, Shayne turned to the others and said, "I don't want to see any of you get in trouble—so my advice is to leave Danny Banks alone. You've gone along with him before, and he's done all right by you—more than all right. So why not trust him now?"

"Because he's selling us out," Aura protested. "We used to be people—now we're nothing but product, merchandise, to be bought and sold and traded like pieces of meat!"

"Cool it, sweetie," said Toni. "You're making an ego trip out of it."

"And why not?"

Lud lifted an eyebrow at Shayne as the catfight got under way again, nodded toward the door, led the detective outside. There, he said, "Believe it or not, this used to be a happy ship."

"Maybe it will be again," the detective suggested.

"I hope so." Lud sighed. "Me, I'm Danny's man, body and soul, what's left of either. He pulled me out of a terminal nuthouse, gave me a half dozen productive years I'd never had had without him."

He paused, added, "Try not to be too hard on the girls. It takes a lot of human being to handle the kind of success we all got too damned early. Take it from me—I *know*. I've made every mistake in the book."

"How about Danny?" Shayne asked.

Lud shook his head. "A miracle," he said. "A downright miracle! There's nobody else like him."

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"Then *you* trust him?"

"I trust him," Lud replied. "Whatever he's doing, he has a damn good reason for it. And he never forgets a friend. I *know*."

Mike Shayne thought it over as he walked slowly back toward the Castle across the sand. To his surprise, it was growing dark, with the sun already set behind the watery horizon. Then, recalling events of the day since his near miss by the fish spear, he realized that a good many hours had elapsed. A glance at his wristwatch informed him that it was close to seven o'clock already.

Some half-heard sound, some half-seen flicker of movement visible from the corner of an eye, gave him a sudden sense that he was being followed. He felt the hairs at the back of his neck stiffen, wished again that he had his .45 in its holster with him.

Once again, he wondered how a man could conceal or even look casual carrying a heavy handgun in modern beachwear on a semi-tropical island. There was, for better or worse, no way. . .

His impulse was to drop flat in the first sand hollow, to seek concealment from which to stalk the stalker, to discover who was holding him under surveillance, thence to find out why.

But cover, save for the low dune now on his right, was sparse. To seek it openly was to reveal to his stalker that he was aware of being stalked. Shayne's only move, since he was unarmed, was to proceed toward the Castle without a break, just as he had been, to appear utterly unconscious of any awareness that he was being followed.

Wishing he had eyes in the sides and back of his head, the detective plodded onward. No further sound reached him and he began to wonder if his own imagination had betrayed him.

A sudden loud protest of gulls from the far side of the dune told him he was not imagining things. A dozen or more of the birds rose above the low sand hill's silhouette, mewling raucously against the pale tearose yellow of the afterglow.

Thus informed of his pursuer's location, Shayne was tempted to counter-circle the dune and emerge behind the stalker. But again, he had no wish to reveal his awareness at this stage of the game—a game he had yet fully to comprehand.

Why should anyone object to the point of violence at the prospect of being made rich overnight—or, if already rich, of being made richer? Especial-

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ly, with nothing criminal involved?

It was, Shayne decided, a very good question.

Still looking straight ahead, save for an occasional glance at the fading afterglow, the redhead moved onward toward the Castle, now looming in lavender shadow against the darkening night sky. To Shayne's left, a pair of early evening stars twinkled their cooling message. Closer to the horizon, a near-full moon hung low.

When he reached the nearest Castle door, the detective, slipped into its sheltering shadow and quickly turned around.

In the middle distance, the gulls were no longer circling low over the dune and their raucous cries had subsided to silence. Shayne scanned the gently uneven sands for any indication of a human presence—but their lavender shadows, dark as those of the Castle itself, balked him.

The growing darkness itself offered fine cover for a full platoon.

Inside the Castle, his sense of danger persisted. Somewhere unseen a clock chimed deeply—seven times. He had better get upstairs to his circular room and Althea. He had no intention of risking a foulup of what could be a most informative rendezvous by being late.

Althea was awaiting him in the flowered chintz armchair beside one of the mullioned windows of his round tower room. She sat neatly curled up on the overstuffed cushion, her bare feet drawn up beside her, held there by her right hand with its nile green fingernails that matched her pedicured toenails.

Her eyes were open, a half smile lay on her full lips. He opened his mouth to give her a greeting when he saw for the first time the trail of still-bright blood welling from the hole in her side, down onto the flowered chair-cover and from there to the carpet below, where it was fast forming a sizable pool.

Althea was very dead.

After the first brief moment of shock, Mike Shayne, his lips tightening, his eyes narrowing, moved swiftly toward the dressing-room corridor that led to the bathroom of his suite. There, he unturned the brackets that held the ventilator screen in place.

Both weapons—Kovacks' .38 and his own .45, plus the small boxes of spare cartridges, were in place, apparently as he had left them The hair he had put atop the screen was no longer there.

A faint smell of recently

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warm metal mixed with the faint acridity of cordite offered all the proof he needed. The redhead picked up his Colt first, sniffed the barrel, then checked clip and chamber. It was unfired.

Replacing it, Shayne turned to Kovacks' Smith & Wesson .38. As he lifted its barrel toward his nostrils, the sharp smells grew sharper. He hardly needed to verify the fact that a single shot had been fired from the chamber.

Putting the pistol down, he tugged at the lobe of his left ear. *Why Kovacks' gun?* he thought.

VII

FACED WITH THE PROBLEM of murder, Mike Shayne's mind went into full sleuthing gear for the first time since his arrival on Castle Cay. He began to plan the steps he should take toward discovering the identity of Althea Grayson's murderer.

Step one—take care of the weapons. Step Two—pending the arrival of official assistance, dispose of the body. Step Three—table the whereabouts of every possible suspect during the period the murder must have been committed.

From the freshness of the victim's blood, the detective put the time of death at no more than a half-hour before his discovery of the body. Probably less than that. Six-thirty to seven was the critical time interval.

With this out of the way, the redhead strapped on his shoulder holster and put his .45 in place. Its weight was definitely reassuring. It was sufficiently cool with the sun down so that his wearing a jacket would attract little if any notice.

There remained the immediate problem of stashing Kovacks' .38 and the extra cartridge containers more securely. Picking the simplest and therefore the least likely place of concealment, he stuck them under the head of the big Emperor sized bed, back against the baseboard of the wall.

Before he tackled disposal of Althea's body, Shayne decided to get the assistance of his employer—not for his physique but for his rapid-fire brain and knowledge of the Castle. He supposed the dead girl had some relief at her switchboard since she could hardly have been on duty twenty-four hours a day.

To his surprise, Donna answered. When Shayne asked her what in the world she was doing there, she replied, "So you think I'm merely an ornamental sex object, impractical, useless!"

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"Shut up, Donna," Shayne told her. "I want Danny."

"Who doesn't?" she countered.

"Danny!" he said, and his tone got to her.

"Danny," he said, when the Vector chief came on. "You'd better get up to my room—*quick.*"

Danny never questioned him, said, "On my way."

He was there in less than one minute. The small man stopped dead when he saw Althea's body in the chair, uttered a soft, *Jesus!"* Then, to the detective, "Any idea who?"

"Not yet," Mike Shayne replied. "Danny, I want to keep this body out of sight until we get official help from the mainland."

"Won't they beef?"

"Sure, but they can't get here until God knows when—and meanwhile, we're sitting on a volcano."

"Have you called them?"

"Not yet," said Mike.

"Go ahead," Danny told him. Then, looking at the dead girl, "That poor darling. Why *her?* She didn't have a mean streak in her body. Everybody loved her."

"Somebody didn't." The redhead reached for the phone, dialed Operator, hung up. "It's dead," he said. "How come? I got you okay just now."

"For island calls, we're on our

own private circuit, Danny Banks paused, frowned, added, "You know what it means, Mike?"

Shayne nodded. "Someone's cut the mainland line. What about some of those gadgets of yours?"

"Slam could probably put something together—but it will take time. What about Althea here. . . ?"

"I want her somewhere nobody else will find her," the detective replied. "Whoever killed her, of course, will figure we've got it under wraps. But the others won't know. And our murderer isn't going to make

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waves that can only lead back to him."

"Or her," the little entrepreneur suggested. Then, after another brief pause, "There is one place. It's awkward, but. . ."

Awkward was putting it mildly. There was a false back to one of the dressing room closets that led to an unused attic in the eaves, unplastered, unlighted, unventilated. Moving the body was difficult, even with the aid of the flashlight Danny came up with. But somehow they managed it, using towels to avoid leaving a trail of blood that would reveal their disposal place.

When the grisly job was done, Shayne flashed the light at the body for a last time. Something glittered faintly in a gap between roof-support timbers alongside the dead girl's corpse. He stretched, got hold of it, fished it out. It was a key-ring, complete with its complement of keys.

Back in the bedroom, an ashen-faced Danny Banks had sunk into another arm chair. Looking up as the detective returned, he said, "Mike, I *loved* that girl."

"But I thought. . ."

"I can guess what you thought. You think I sleep with all of them." A pause, a rueful half-smile, then, "Hell, maybe I have with most. It's part of the rock scene. But I *love* these kids, every one of them. And Althea—well, all I can say is, how could anyone hurt *her?*"

There was silence, then Danny sat up briskly, said, "What next, Mike? This is your pidgin."

"Recognize these?" The detective handed him the keys. "I found them close to where we put Althea."

The tiny impressario frowned at the ring, flipped it over, said, "They look a lot like Matt Kovacks'. Yeah—here's the key to the Castle door, here's the key to the copter. . . Nobody else had both of those, except me."

"Let's see yours," said Shayne.

Danny hesitated, then shrugged, pulled them out, handed both sets to Mike, who tossed the impressario's back, said, "*Nobody* else? You're sure?"

"I'm sure." He frowned again, ran a small nervous hand over his forehead. "Jesus, that means. . ."

"I know what it means," said Shayne.

"I guess I suspected it all along."

"That Kovacks was still on the island?"

Danny nodded. "That Kovacks is dead and still on the

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cay. Which leaves us with the question of where."

"And who, Danny. And who. . ."

"Yes, of course. . .and why and when and how?" He glanced at the redhead, his eyes ferret bright. "What next, Mike? I'm at your disposal."

"Thanks." Mike Shayne tugged at his ear. "You have dinner as if nothing had happened."

"Dinner—*now?*" The little impressario's complexion, which had been regaining its normal sallow hue, became ashen once more. "Jesus, Mike—what do you think I'm made of?"

"Putty—like the rest of us," the detective replied. He went to a closet, returned with a bottle of Martell and a couple of glasses. "We'll have to imagine our own rocks," he said, measuring a goodly dram. "But then, this is strictly medicinal."

Banks gagged and gulped twice before he got his brandy down for good. Shayne handled his drink more smoothly. He said, "The Galvanic Duo must be ready to come up for air from wherever you have them stashed. Why not let them out of their cage for dinner, too?"

"I'll try. Where will you be?"

"I want to check something outside," the detective told him.

He slipped unnoticed out a side door of the Castle, fingering the butt of the automatic strapped to his chest as he surveyed the early night scene. The shadows were deep but, thanks to the near-fulness of the moon, there was sufficient light for the redhead's purpose.

He needed to be alone then if only to curb the cold anger that was rising inside him. He had a very definite feeling that he had been flim-flammed, bamboozled, had had various varieties of wool pulled over his eyes. Shayne did not like the feeling at all—least of all when a girl like Althea Grayson had been murdered and, he felt increasingly sure, a good fellow-operative name Matt Kovacks.

Somebody was going to pay for it. . .with interest compounded every second.

For the time being, he shut out personal feeling to concentrate on the job in front of him—discovery of whether or not he had been shadowed on his return to the Castle prior to finding the body and, if possible, by whom.

The gulls had been aroused on the Gulf side of the low dune that hid the boathouse "shack" from the Castle itself. The detective moved to the water's edge, walking in the hard sand left by the ebbing tide so as not to disturb previous footprints, if any.

Finding none at first, he de-

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cided whoever he sought must either have walked in the shallow water or in the softer sands of the beach. He was almost around the point made by the dune when he saw the trail—a half dozen vague prints whose size was impossible to determine thanks to the softness of the sand.

But they did lead toward the low dune. Music drifted from the shack as he worked carefully around the base of the low sand hill, distance making the throbbing rock and roll almost palatable to the detective's untutored ears. He wondered what the kids had been trying to find out from him when they asked him there that afternoon.

Shayne lost the trail of sand-fuzzy footsteps completely, then picked it up again beyond a clump of coarse sand grass, moving toward the Castle. Nothing definite, of course—but enough to convince the detective that he *had* been observed during his return to the Castle.

By whom. . .and why?

The redhead lit a cigaret and was pondering these questions when his attention was riveted by the soft sound of a sibilant breath, the even softer sound of a football on shifting sand close behind him.

Arms were suddenly wrapped around his chest, long strong legs around his thighs, as a body thudding against his back almost knocked him prone on the sand. . .

VIII

"GOTCHA!" SAID A LOW-PITCHED female voice. Then, as his captor became aware of the pistol strapped to Shayne's chest, "Hey—why the hardware?"

"Dammit, Donna!" The redhead disentangled himself. "You could have got yourself killed."

Once again squatting on her heels, the long-limbed young woman knuckled sand from her nose, said, "I'm beginning to realize that. What's going on?"

"First—what were you trying to prove?"

"Not much, I guess. I was heading for the shack. I wanted to try and knock some sense into Aura. Then I saw you snooping around and decided to get even with the surprise you gave me the other night." And, when the redhead remained silent, "Catching me naked on the bed in your room."

The detective said, "It's okay. But if I'd heard you. . ." He let it hang.

"Mike," she said. "Something's happened. I mean, your carrying a gun. . . "

He nodded. He didn't think she had had a hand in Althea's murder but decided against re-

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vealing it—yet. There was simply too much he didn't know about her—or about anyone else on the cay.

He said, "Were you on that bed by accident, or were you hoping Matt Kovacks would show up?"

She hesitated, staring at him in the moonlight, brushed a stray strand of hair from her eyes, said, "Damn—you *are* smart!"

"Well. . . ?"

"Okay, so I was hoping against hope Matt would show up. I thought Danny had flown to the mainland to bring him back."

"You knew him?"

"Sure I knew him. I was the one who got him to brace Danny for the job."

"Your idea or his?"

"Matt's," Donna replied. "I told him Danny was looking for someone to keep things in order while he was setting up the Galvanic deal. He said he wanted the job to be near me. So I suggested he go after it."

Mike Shayne thought that over, said, "You didn't push him with Danny?"

"*Hah!* I know Danny better than that. He likes to think he picks his own people. I just told Matt to apply for it."

"What was he doing?"

Donna hesitated, said, "Damn if I know exactly. But if you ever knew Matt, you could tell he was competent at whatever he did."

"And you believed he wanted the job to be near you?"

"Why not?" She sounded hurt. "Am I so hard to take?"

"Who's kidding who?" he countered. "*Did* you believe it?"

"Not entirely."

"How long ago was this?" Shayne asked.

"When Matt was hired? Oh, around three months—it was last November—just before we left the West Coast."

The detective lifted a hand to silence her. The continuous sound and beat of hard rock under which they had been conversing were abruptly cut off. There was the slam of a door and then female voices and Aura and Toni walked slowly past them toward the Castle. The detective and Donna waited until they had gone by.

"What's with those two?" Shayne got to his feet, dusted sand from his clothing. "One minute at each other's throats—the next, best buddies."

Also rising, Donna shrugged. "Love-hate," she said. "It's not uncommon. This is a highly nervous business, and that's the understatement of the year."

"You seem to handle it okay," he said not without admiration

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as he moved toward the shack.

"Just lucky, I guess." Keeping pace with him, "Where are we going?"

"I'd like a talk with Lud Soule," Shayne told her.

"Ten to one, you won't get to," said Donna.

He didn't. When they reached the shack, dimly lit via a single ceiling bulb, the fat composer-accompanist lay flat on his back on a floor mattress, snoring gently although his eyes were open, staring sightlessly upward. He was obviously stoned.

"Poor Lud!" Donna shook her head. "He was the leader, the pioneer. Now look at the bastard."

She went to a sink against the far wall, poured cool water on a towel, wrung it out, then laid it gently over Lud's eyes. He stopped snoring, grunted softly something that could have been thanks.

Then, turning to face the detective, "Well?"

The detective shook his head, said, "How long do you give him?"

She shrugged, shook her head, said, "Not very long. I've seen them like this before—too often. That's what got *me* off the stuff. I was lucky—I could quit."

"What purpose does this shack have?" he asked.

"It's a safety valve. Don't worry—your pal Danny knows all about it. He even comes over here once in a while. But not too often. He knows some of the gang have kinky outlets—and he'd rather they let go here than in the Castle."

"I understand." He looked around the room, added, "Let's get back to the Castle before they start looking for us."

"Unlikely." Donna's quick wry smile flashed. "This isn't a girls' finishing school, you know."

He turned his head. The move saved his life as a bullet whined past the spot where it had been to ricochet off the door-jamb and spat viciously into the far wall of the room—followed instantly by the crack of the shot.

Shayne's Colt roared just behind it and shot out the light, putting the room in darkness as he dropped to his knees and pulled back a foot to gain shelter. Peering into the night, he could see nothing until his eyes adjusted. He heard Donna approach softly, smelled her light perfume, felt her hand on his arm.

"Stay back," he whispered.

There followed silence, broken only by the gentle sound of Lud's unbroken snoring. After unbearably long moments had passed, the redhead whispered,

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"Stay put, sweetie, until I call. Then count a slow ten before you move. Then move fast."

"Okay, Mike," she whispered. "Be careful."

He slipped out in a crouch, hugging the side of the shack, then zigzagging toward the shelter of the low dune. Not until he was safely with its cover did he call the girl to follow. She reached him quickly, breathing faster than usual from her sprint.

He said, *"Good!"*, then scrambled to the top of the dune, where he again flung himself flat.

Donna, moving up beside him, said, "Do you see anything?"

"Not yet." He swept the cay with his eyes, grateful for the moonlight but wishing he had a pair of infra-red field glasses. A quarter mile away, a sudden rectangle of light blossomed as the side door of the Castle was opened. A silhouetted figure showed briefly, then vanished as the door was pulled shut behind it.

Indentification, even as male or female, was impossible . . .Shayne uttered a couple of heartfelt curses out of sheer frustration.

Suddenly, Donna gripped the redhead's left bicep, said, "Mike, what's that—over *there,* near the water."

Shayne followed her directions, saw what looked like a bundle of old clothes or a large mass of seaweed on the sand just above the waterline. He had been so busy trying to read the landward side of the cay that he had not looked toward the water.

Despite the detective's strength, it took their combined efforts to drag the limp and sopping mass further up the beach away from the rising Gulf tide. Slam Barrett, the electronics wizard might look rapier lean, but his near-seven foot frame supported a good three hundred pounds. Nor did

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the scuba gear he was wearing lighten the load.

He was out like a light—a condition obviously caused by whatever had put the bump just above his right temple, close to the hairline.

IX

THE CASUALTY LIST for the battle of Castle Cay was mounting Shayne thought, as he poured seawater over the knocked-out black from a child's pail Donna found lying on the beach. He was damned sure in his own mind now that Matt Kovacks' absence was not voluntary. Althea Grayson's certainly was not—and the only wounded casualty to date had hardly cold-cocked himself.

Then there were the two attempts on his own life—one with fish spear, the other with a bullet. As he returned to the water to refill the pail, the redhead laid the one murder and one probable to backlash from the prospective deal between *Vector* and *Galvanic*. Most men and women capable of killing would kill for a small fraction of the money involved.

Therefore, the attempts to kill himself must have resulted from belief that one Mike Shayne was able to toss a monkey wrench into the works. It made good enough sense, except. . . he had not a whisper of any idea that could impede the amalgamation or sellout or whatever it was.

He poured a third pail of water over the stubbornly unconscious Slam Barrett while Donna muttered reproofs and delivered a verbal lecture on the effects and impacts of concussion, the perils or treatment without the presence or at least the advice of a qualified physician.

Satisfied that the electronics expert was not about to regain consciousness, Shayne said, "Stay with him, Donna. I'm going to the Castle for help right now."

He found Danny Banks alone in his office with no receptionist at the outer desk. The tiny entrepreneur seemed to have aged visibly since Shayne watched him handle the *Galvanic* executives like chessmen in the conference earlier that day. Nor did his called, "Come in," responding to the detective's knock, ring with its customary ebullience.

When the detective told him what had happened, Danny rubbed one small hand across his face, then took a deep breath and said, "Mike, I'm putting you in charge. With Slam out of it, we won't get the telephone cable repaired tonight. I'm going to fly him to

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the mainland and bring back some help."

Mike Shayne nodded. He had been about to suggest such a course but the entrepreneur was right with him as usual. The two of them set about it briskly. Danny briefed the redhead during the silent intervals in the process of the job.

When at last the still unconscious Slam Barrett was safely aboard the helicopter, Danny leaned from the craft door to say, "It's a hell of a load to hand you when you're so green on the job, but I'm counting on you to handle it. There's nobody else I can trust."

"Amen!" answered the detective. He turned to Donna, standing by his side, as she said, "What about me?"

"Come *on*," said the detective when the aircraft had taken off. He led her back into the Castle, up to his room, where he searched for and found Matt Kovacks' Smith & Wesson still under the big bed. Retrieving it, he rose and faced her.

"Honey," he said, "do you know how to use this thing?"

She took it from him, unholstered it, snapped out the clip, checked the chamber, replaced the clip, returned the gun to its holster.

"I know how," she replied. "I did a bit as a gun moll once in a Hollywood motorcycle movie."

"You're my deputy," he told her.

"What are my duties, Sheriff?" she asked.

"Just see everyone's where he or she is supposed to be while I scout around." Mike Shayne paused, added, "You know what that gun of yours still being here means. . . "

"That there's a third pistol on the cay?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I'll keep a wall at my back," she promised. "Mike, where will you be?"

"Around," he told her. "But before we do anything else, I want you to show me the recording studios—where the Galvanic boys are doing their listening, all that. I was going to ask Slam Barrett to give me a guided tour, but. . . " He shrugged.

"Come on then." As she led him from the bedroom, still fitting the heavy pistol to her slim waist, she said, "Are you always so goddam competent, Mike?"

"I try to be," he told her. "What about you?"

"I try to be," she echoed. Shayne debated telling her about Althea's murder, again decided against it. While her reactions to date had been superb, he had not known her very long. And Danny's parting shot—"There's nobody else I

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can trust"—was still ringing in his inner ear.

But at the moment, apart from Donna, there was nobody else *he* could trust. . . and the detective had to have somebody to back him up if he were to get on with the business of finding a murderer on Castle Cay.

"Come on," Donna said, leading the way. She walked briskly, gracefully, her long legs taking the stairs down to the main hall rapidly.

Outside, she moved to the left from the big double front door, leading him past twin mullioned windows to a smaller door concealed in a recess of the big old structure. It opened when she turned the knob and, following her inside, Shayne found himself standing at the end of a corridor lined with widely spaced other doors and ending in a right angle turn to the right that must, he felt certain, lead back to the main hall.

Beside each corridor door was a window offering wide-angled view of the room behind it. The first two on his left were empty—in the third, a group of towering black musicians were belting their instruments silently behind the soundproof wall.

"Monk's Monkeys," Donna informed him. "Ever hear them? They're something."

The redhead shook his head and they proceeded further along the corridor. The studios on their right were empty. But after making the turn, in a smaller room on the left, Aaron Silver sat in a desk chair, his eyes half-closed, obviously listening. As they watched, the *Galvanic* executive roused himself briefly to scrawl briefly on a spiral backed pad at his right elbow, then resumed his listening position.

"Still at it," Donna murmured.

"Danny said it would keep them busy till midnight listening to tapes," the detective told her. Then, "Where's his sidekick—Carl Winters?"

"I'll give odds it's *not* the Ladies' Room," Donna replied.

As if to prove her correct, a door closed behind them and the cadaverous ulcer-type appeared and pushed past them toward the studio in which Silver was listening.

"How's it going?" Donna asked him.

"Don't *ask!*" Winters made a brush-away gesture. "Right now, I'd had R-and-R to *here!*" He lifted one hand a foot above his head to indicate the water surface. Then, evidently realizing whom he was talking to, "Sorry, kid, you're tremendous, but enough is too much sometimes. I'm not like Aaron—he

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hasn't stopped listening to rock since he heard Haley's Comets do *Rock Around the Clock* in *The Blackboard Jungle*."

"I know what you mean." Donna smiled, added, "Think nothing of it."

"Good kid!" Winters patted the back of her hand, rolled his eyes and slipped back inside with his colleague. His shoulders shook and he patted his diaphragm in an inaudible burp.

"Answer your question?" Donna asked Shayne.

"Excuse me, honey." The detective decided to visit the facility from which Winters had just emerged. As he stood there, he noticed another door that looked as if it led to some sort of closet. Out of habit, he tried this door before returning to Donna Lydell. It was locked.

She had moved away from the studio window, lifted an eyebrow as the detective appproached, said, "What now, boss?"

"Where's your gun?" he countered.

She pouted, said, "Oh, honey, where can I *wear* it?"

She glanced down at her trimly female figure and the redhead followed her gaze. In the contemporary young-people's uniform of tight patched denims, there was literally no room for the missing Matt Kovacks' big Smith & Wesson.

He said, "Better carry it in a bag."

She pouted again, said, "But it's so Goddam *heavy*, Mike!" Then, "Besides, who's gonna shoot *me?*"

He wanted to reply, "Somebody shot Althea, and she was as cute as you, sweetie." But he held his tongue. If Donna knew about the earlier murder, it would indicate her involvement and he would hardly be giving her news. If she didn't know, he decided, she was better off.

Again Donna asked, "What now, boss?"

"You go on inside and keep things under control."

"Where'll you be, boss?"

Shayne shrugged heavy shoulders. "I'll be around. Somebody's got to cap this gusher before anybody else gets killed."

Her light blue eyes brightened. Unexpectedly strong fingers gripped his left bicep. *"Mike!"* she said. 'You're onto something?"

"Let's just say," he told her, "that I've got the glimmering of an idea how to tackle this mess."

"Can I help?" Her excitement was electric.

"Can you rig a wire to the mainland?" he asked.

A hand flew to her mouth.

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Her eyes narrowed, then widened. "If Slam were here. . . " she began, added, "But he isn't of course." She frowned. "If I can find Althea. . . "

"It won't wait," Shayne assured her. "What have you got in mind?"

"Not repairing the cable—there's no way from this end." The grey eyes narrowed. "But a couple of the boys are Ham radio nuts. Slam for one." Her face fell, lifted. "But Slam wasn't the only one."

"Get a contact set up with somebody in Miami," he told her.

"What sort of message?" Donna asked.

"None—yet," the detective replied. "Just have them ready on standby. Got it?"

"Got it."

X

MIKE SHAYNE WENT BACK along the recording rooms corridor after seeing Donna into the main hall. It was the first opportunity he had had to total up the events of the day just past, to assess and catalogue them, to seek some sort of coherent order on which to base future action—action he knew would have to be conclusive.

He glanced inside the rest room again, tried the locked closet door, noted for the first time a message penciled on the wall above a small brass hook. It read, *Please return key when not in use.*

At the moment, there was no key.

Frowning, the redhead turned away and went on back outside to the front of the building. Automatically, as he moved into the softness of the semi-tropical night, his hand went to the butt of the Colt .45 nestling beneath his jacket in its shoulder holster. It was cocked, loaded and ready.

Shayne turned right, walking quietly alongside the path of crushed seashells that skirted the Castle on this end. Around a corner clump of bird of paradise flowers, the moon-lapped water of the Gulf stirred restfully against the beach at the foot of the shallow slope of the cay.

A fine night for romance, he thought, then banished such extraneous considerations from his mind as he moved toward the beach and turned right again on the sands, moving slowly toward the low dune that masked the shack beyond.

Matt Kovacks had disappeared six nights earlier, leaving clothing and gear, including his pistol and ammo, behind him. As far as the detective knew, there had been nothing suspicious until the discharge

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of the fish-spear earlier in the day that had so nearly ended the activities of Mike Shayne permanently. Someone had put a furrow in his left deltoid. It still smarted every time he moved his arm.

Since then, there had been another attempt on his life—this one land based—Althea Grayson had been murdered in his bedroom—and Slam Barrett had been knocked on the head further along the beach on which Shayne was walking.

For the moment, Shayne set aside Althea's murder to consider the other two crimes and their possible motives. The same shore of the cay had been involved in both, a few hundred yards apart.

Why had there been an attempt on the detective's life? At first consideration, it seemed absurd, an invitation to trouble. The redhead tugged at the lobe of his left ear, frowned.

On the other hand, if it had been successful, it *could* have been explained away as an accidental underwater killing. But why kill Mike Shayne—above all, why kill him then—and there?

The only motive the redhead could justify lay in the possibility that his presence on the Gulf bottom, in that place and at that particular time, imperiled the would-be killer so

greatly that he (or she) considered the attempt justified.

His frown deepened. Why then—and why there? The temporal cause could be that his being where he was at that time threatened discovery of something the killer felt must not be discovered. As for the place—he had been approaching the old schooner hulk. . .

Shayne skipped to the finding of Slam Barrett. The injured electronics wizard had been found further along the beach, nearer the dune. His clothing was not wet, so how had he posed a threat—especially in the darkness?

The detective ran a thumb along the line of his jaw, recalling details of the scene on the beach after his own near-murder. Donna had treated the graze on his deltoid, then Slam and Aura had emerged from

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the water. Then Aura, after bitching about Danny's supposed defection, had wandered off toward the shack, then Toni had emerged from the water to have Slam paddle her backside.

Aura had been wearing her scuba gear when Shayne saw the last of her—which meant such gear was kept in the shack although he had failed to notice it during his afternoon visit.

Could Slam Barrett, for reasons of his own, have been heading for the shack to don scuba gear when he was knocked on the head? A good question, Shayne decided, with another to follow. . .

. . .what had Slam been intending to look for?

Mike Shayne was all but sure of that now—it had either to be the body of the missing Matt Kovacks or some physical evidence of his murder.

And the place? It had to be the hulk of the long-sunken schooner.

Shayne considered returning to the Castle to don scuba gear and search the hulk himself. . .then decided against it and moved on toward the cottage. If there were gear in that haven, he could borrow it without the fact being noted at the Castle.

Save for Lud Soule's still slumbering body, the dimly lit ex-boathouse was unoccupied. The crashed rock deity continued to snore while the redhead located scuba equipment with little difficulty, stripped to his shorts and donned it after finding the compressed air cylinder more than half full.

After wondering what to do with his .45, he put it in a plastic bag and sealed it with a rubber band, taking it along—also a loaded spear-gun and a powerful flashlight with an elastic strap to hold it in place atop his forehead.

The moon had slid further toward the horizon and shadows were deepening as he knelt to bury the Colt under a tuft of beach grass on the Gulf side of the hillock of sand, where he could not be observed from the Castle.

The air had cooled considerably since sun down, which made the almost milky warmth of the Gulf water the more welcome. Once he was fully submerged, visibility was close to zero until he got the headlamp going.

Even then, he could see only a few yards ahead and, of course, the focus was narrow. Even so, swarms of bright small fish, their slumbers destroyed by the beam, flashed in and out of its path of brightness.

It seemed to take forever to

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reach the rotted hull of the sunken schooner—and, once he found it, there remained the question of how best to board the unfortunate vessel. As before, from his inshore position, Shayne found himself staring mostly at her bottom.

Undisturbed by either marine or human agency, the detective swam around the sunken vessel, found himself looking at her deck for the first time. It lay angled a good thirty degrees, forcing him to scramble up it toward the hatch in slow motion.

He floated down a near-horizontal companionway to a bashed in cabin amidships, just forward of what had been the vessel's cockpit. The cabin door pushed inward with some difficulty, due to the pressure of water on either side, but the detective floated through to find himself in a small saloon from which all portable equipment had long since been stripped by souvenir hunters and other marauders.

There, wedged between a wall seat and a bracketed-down table, lay the body of a man. It could not have lain there many days—there was still some flesh on the face. But Kovacks, if it was the body of the ex-Marine, ex-bodyguard assistant to Danny Banks, did not offer exactly an attractive spectacle for tourists. Half of the walrus mustache dropped lopsidedly from the remaining half of his upper lip.

As to the cause of death, there could be no question. A single fish-spear shaft protruded glitteringly from the left eye-socket of the corpse, whence it had embedded itself in the brain. Shayne judged that his predecessor had died instantaneously.

As he turned away from his gruesome find, the redhead wondered what had put Slam Barrett onto the possibility of finding Kovacks' remains here. Could it, he wondered, have been the attack on himself that morning? Any such conclusions, he decided, would have to wait.

Shayne's next step was to get out of here and back to the Castle. The step after that was to get in touch with Danny on the mainland and report his finding of the body. After that, there would be the little matter of running a double murderer to earth.

A glow of light that did not come from his own lamp informed the detective that he was no longer alone on the wrecked schooner. Evidently, the killer had decided not to wait before coming to grips with the redhead.

Quickly, the redhead snapped off his own lamp, fumbled

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through near-absolute darkness before, close to the rail, he began to make out shapes around him as his eyes adjusted to the faint illumination of moonlight filtered by unclear water. Evidently, his antagonist had turned off his own lamp almost simultaneously with Shayne, for the submarine darkness was not relieved.

Wishing he knew his surroundings better, the redhead groped his way to the upper rail of the careened vessel. Then, kicking rapidly with finned feet, he drove his way upward to the surface.

He did not keep his head above water long. He had barely cleared its surface when there came a whine and a splash close enough to ruin temporarily the visibility of his face glass, followed by the bark of a heavy handgun.

There was only one thing to do—submerge again.

Shayne did so and moved northward, following the shore line until he reached an area off the low dune. He emerged with great caution until he was behind the low sand hill's cover and had regained possession of his own automatic.

But no further effort was made as he got back to the shack and his clothes.

XI

LUD SOULE STILL SLUMBERED on the floor-pad mattress of the shack. Dressed and with gun harness strapped to his chest, Mike Shayne studied him to see if the young-old man had shifted position since the detective's departure, could find no evidence that Lud had moved.

Poor bastard! he thought as he left the erstwhile boathouse. There was something tragic about a brilliantly successful, still-young man destroyed by the by-products of the medium which had brought him fame so early.

Then the redhead thought about Matt Kovacks, then about Althea Grayson, and sympathy turned to well chilled steel within him.

He had found the victims—one, two, three, himself almost making four. Now it was up to him to bring the murderer to heel before any further victims were destroyed.

Having reached the Castle without incident, the detective went in search of Donna, found her sitting behind Althea's desk. Looking up when he entered, she said, "Thank God, Mike! I was beginning to panic."

He sat on the edge of the desk, said, "I'm okay. Where the hell *is* everyone?"

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She accounted for the principals—Monk's Monkeys still recording, the *Galvanic* duo still listening to tapes—Aura, Toni and the rest of the group at their various forms of amusement. Then her forehead wrinkled and she said, "I can't find Althea anywhere. I haven't seen her since I spelled her here at the board late this afternoon."

"Did you do that often?" he asked.

She nodded, said, "I was a switchboard girl for a San Francisco brokerage house before my career got going. But I was not Althea. She was like another Slam Barrett—female division. She could hook connections together nobody else ever thought of—and make them work."

"Any vibes tonight?" He nodded toward the instruments in front of her.

"Nothing hot—not with the Mainland cable cut."

"How about your radio rig?" Shayne asked her.

"A couple of the technical boys are working on it," she told him. "They'll be ready any minute."

"Let me know, sweetie." He turned to leave.

"Take me with you," she said. "Mike, I'm scared spitless, sitting here by myself."

"Sorry, Donna. Stick it out till you get a Mainland connection."

"*Then* what?" She wrinkled her nose, sighed, but stayed put. "When you get Danny, tell him I found Matt Kovacks."

"My God, no! *Where?*"

"In that hulk sunk off the beach," the redhead told her. "He's been dead for some days."

"*Damn!* Poor Matt." She shook her head, said, "I damn near loved that hard shell bastard." Then, to Shayne, her eyes level, "Get the murderer—for *me*."

"I'm going to do just that," Shayne promised.

He was not quite that confident as he left the room—but out of what he had already learned, a pattern was emerging that loomed ever clearer in his inner vision.

Shayne turned on his heel, stuck his head in on Donna again, said, "How long have the *Galvanic* boys been around the Cay?"

She frowned, then said, "Here. About a week, I guess. Carl Winters, that is. Aaron Silver has been flying back and forth to Miami with Danny."

"Figures," Shayne replied. "Thanks. And keep your gun handy in case things blow up. You're vulnerable, you know."

"I know." Donna opened the top drawer of the desk, half-pulled the Smith & Wesson

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from it. "Get back fast, Mike. I really *am* scared spitless."

"This shouldn't take long," the detective assured her.

He left the Castle by the front door, checked out his .45 as he walked around in front of it to what he was beginning to think of as the postern gate.

Along the corridor, past the black Rock group, he walked, turned into the rest room, tried the locked door inside. It still refused to move and the key was still missing. Drawing his Colt, Mike Shayne shot out the lock, pulled the door open toward him.

What lay before him was not a closet but a sort of storage chamber with a door behind. It was bolted on the inside. The detective opened it, found himself looking out at the southern portion of the cay.

Inside the chamber, along with buckets, brushes, a vacuum cleaner, a plumber's helper, piles of rags, a mop and other sundries, was something that obviously did not belong—a full wetsuit and scuba outfit, whose surfaces were still dripping.

"Okay, so you know." The voice from behind him was pleasantly accented—and familiar. Shayne had heard it before that afternoon.

He did not hesitate but spun rapidly, flinging himself to one side and down, crashing atop a large bucket as two large-calibre bullets whined through the place where his head had been to ricochet viciously off the wall behind him.

Shayne's gun spoke once—but it was enough. Aaron Silver grunted as the .45 slug struck him full in the chest, hurling his well cushioned figure back against the wall. The *Galvanic* mogul stared at the detective as if in surprise.

His mouth opened but no sound came forth save a cough, followed by a small bright Niagara of crimson. His eyes went glassy as he slid awkwardly to a sitting position atop a pile of rags against the wall alongside the restroom door.

Carl Winters appeared in the doorway, took in the scene and said, "My God, Mike! Did you have to kill him?" He uttered a resounding belch and collapsed in a faint squarely across the threshold.

* * *

"Frankly," the detective told Loren Howard over a mint julep on his Bal Harbour terrace the following afternoon, "I didn't know which one of them did it at that point—or if both were working together."

"The main thing is, Mike," Howard assured him, "that you

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stopped him before he sabotaged the deal."

"And before anyone else suffered," said Danny.

"Amen!" boomed Slam Barrett, looking like an emperor sized African superchief wearing a white turban of bandages. "My head is still ringing where that so-and-so socked me."

"I don't see why he had to kill Althea?" Donna asked.

"My guess," said Shayne, "is that she listened in on a few calls Silver didn't want her to hear—and then let him know it."

"Poor Althea never could keep her mouth shut," said Slam Barrett. "Damn! I'm going to miss *her*."

"Me, too," Donna put in. "She was the only other sane female on the Cay."

"Are you sure about that, love?" Danny asked her.

Shayne said, "Danny, the way I understand is this—you were selling out to Galvanic to take the business details of running Vector off your back. And with the loot and with Loren's help, you were buying control of Galvanic at the same time. Right?"

"Over simplified," Danny replied. "But that's the meat and potatoes."

"Why?" Shayne prodded.

Danny spread his tiny hands, said, "Because, the way things were going, I was too swamped with details to take care of my kids. The deal meant Galvanic would take the details off my hands so I could concentrate on them full time and bring them along the way I used to like one big crazy family."

"Why didn't you tell them?" Slam asked. "They thought you were dumping them."

"And have somebody like Aura or Toni get stoned and blow the whole gaff? I didn't dare. I guess Althea got onto it and look what happened to her."

"One more thing," said the detective. "What was Silver's big beef?"

Danny Banks shrugged said, "From what Carl Winters tells us, Aaron had been skimming Galvanic for years. In the auditing that was bound to happen once the transfer was made, he was almost bound to be exposed as a thief."

"What about Winters?"

"The stockholders put him in there to keep Silver in line," said Loren Howard. "He couldn't do it. All he's got out of the job so far is ulcers."

"Do we go along with him?" Danny asked.

"We go along with him for the time being," Loren Howard replied. "We'd better have somebody in charge who knows which way is up if you want

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things to turn out the way you want them to."

Mike Shayne got up and walked to the marble balustrade of his friend's flagged terrace overlooking the northern end of the bay. He was well enough pleased with the case now that it was cleaned up. Lord knows, he had profited for his three-day stint on Castle Cay—$15,000 worth, plus the three $500 daily payments he had received while on the job. He wished, however, there had been some way to prevent Althea Grayson's murder. . .

"Mike!" Donna spoke softly at his elbow. "I don't give a damn about their going along with Carl Winters. How about you going along with me—for the time being?"

Mike looked down at the hazel eyes turned upward to meet his and thought of the elegance of spirit, the wit, the style, the unique blend of talent and personality that had gone into the creation of Donna Lydell.

He thought of Lucy Hamilton, still aunt-visiting in Tampa, and of a long, lonely night ahead, and gathered her arm into his.

"For the time being—why the hell not?" he countered.

In The Next Issue—Exclusively Yours—

THE CASE OF THE STOLEN JEWELS

The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

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THE BLEEDER

An ex-call girl married to a rich man with political ambitions makes an ideal victim for blackmailer Tony Cicero. But Tony has a problem—he doesn't know when to stop.

by ART CROCKETT

SHARON WARNER PACED my apartment like a caged tigress. Puny fists were clenched, knuckles white. Rage had quickened her breathing and one rich brown lock refused to stay in place.

"He's gone too far, Tony. First it was ten thousand every two months. Then once a month. Now he wants a payment every other week."

I grinned. It was still a pleasure after all these years to watch that body of hers move.

Sharon gripped the edge of my bar. "You've got to come through for me."

I laughed. "Not me, baby. I'm retired. I'm into other things now." I poured her another scotch. "Yeah, you might say that Tony Cicero is too old for that kind of stuff."

She looked at me suspiciously. "Nobody ever retires in your . . . line"

She had me there. I hadn't

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been active as a button man in years, but if the right offer came along I'd probably grab it.

This one, however, was definitely not the right offer.

"Murder's not the answer." It sounded phony, especially coming from me. Murder had always been the answer. It had provided me with a good many years of security.

Sharon gulped her fourth scotch. "Okay, if you won't do it, tell me how I can." She forced a smile. "You used to tell me a lot of things. You know, about crime and things."

I hated to do it, but I suggested a saner course of action. "Go to the cops."

"I can't do that. My God, Tony, that's the last thing I could do."

If you didn't think too deeply about it, Sharon was right. Her old man was running for state senator. Any hint of a scandal would ruin him politically. And Sharon Warner had a beaut of a scandal being kept under wraps by the periodical payment of ten thou per.

I gave her my view. Mark Warner was filthy rich. He had time on his hands. To occupy that time he had begun to play in political waters. But he was no crusader with an axe to grind. He had no real desire to do something constructive for his community. So what difference did it make if a scandal knocked him out of politics before he got his feet wet?

"I don't give a damn about his political career," Sharon wailed. "He'll find out about *me*."

"No, he won't," I assured her. "The cops have ways to keep things like this quiet. Just tell them you don't want any publicity and they'll go along with you."

"What makes you so sure?" she asked.

I spelled it out for her. "Your husband's a law and order candidate. The cops love him. He praises the department in every speech."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

I took it a step further. "Mark's a shoo-in. The way he throws money around he can't miss. He's spending four times as much as his opponent. The cops would be crazy to turn down your request to keep the case hush-hush."

She was thoughtful. "I see what you mean."

I had a lot of misgivings about what I was doing, but I had no choice.

Sharon was close to me. My lips brushed her cheek and a whole raft of sweet memories flooded back to me. Her fingers played some magic on my neck. She smiled. "Never thought I'd

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hear Tony Cicero tell somebody to go to the cops."

"Wish you hadn't gone straight."

She laughed. "I'm getting out of here before I slip back into the life." She dug into her purse like she was looking for something. "Damn it, I don't have enough for cab fare."

"No problem." I gave her a twenty and watched her head for the door, swaying deliberately to tantalize me.

"Thanks, Tony. And I'll take your advice."

In another moment she was gone. Her aroma, though, lingered. I reached for a cigar, remembering the old days with her. Sharon Warner, née Doran. Call girl. She had always been good to be with, great to have on your arm at a nightspot. She had elicited the kind of stares that—

Larry Gibbons smashed his way into my dreams. "I heard the whole thing. Why the hell didn't you give her my name and address while you were at it?"

"Take it easy, kid."

"What about *me*? What am *I* supposed to do if she goes to the cops?"

"Change your lifestyle, that's all. Shave off that Fu Manchu, get a haircut and get out of those blue jeans. Wear a suit and a tie."

Larry slumped into a chair and draped one leg over the arm. He was young, inexperienced, but a good student. He was excellent at liaison work, like threatening Sharon with exposure if she didn't meet his demands.

"I think you blew it, Tony."

"Uh, huh. We pulled fifty thou from her so far. Now we ease off. Her private account must be almost depleted anyway."

"So the golden goose stops laying her eggs, right?" Larry still fumed, but managed to keep it under control.

"Keep in mind what I told you about greed. It put more guys in the slam than anything else." I made him a highball. "You got to know when to stop. With Sharon Warner we shot our bolt."

"I think we could've jolted her again," Larry said, stubbornly.

"Don't be a chump. You heard her from the other room. You're lucky she didn't blast you on the last pick-up. She's mad enough."

"I heard something different. I heard you taking her off the hook because you still have a thing for her."

"Hey, Larry baby, that's wrong. I had to protect myself." I handed him the drink. "She means nothing to me anymore.

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Would I bleed her if she did?"

After a few drinks Larry began to see things my way. As I said, he was a good student, but sometimes you had to draw pictures for him.

That night Sharon interfered with my sleep. The years hadn't changed her at all. If she wanted to she could get back into the life with no trouble.

Remembering those old days with her kept me awake. We'd had a special relationship. Nothing serious. We liked being with each other. Whenever we were both free, we got together. Sometimes we'd go to dinner, or a show, or maybe a nightspot. Just as often we would rap for hours over drinks in a quiet place.

Sharon was known as Tony's girl, but that never meant anything. Our way of life could never lead to marriage and the small house in the suburbs and we knew it. So we enjoyed ourselves.

We rarely talked shop. Sharon never tried to pry into my affairs and I was never curious about the "dates" she had. When I finally told her how I told her how I made my bread she wasn't shocked. Buttoning up people was an entirely impersonal act with me. It was a job. The fact that I had never been caught had been evidence of my expertise.

Sharon had been the only outsider who knew my business. I trusted her. She could have fingered me at any time, but never did.

Then the bubble broke. She met Mark Warner. Everything ended for us. Sharon got out of the life. She dropped everyone who knew her as a Park Avenue hooker—and that included me.

The hurt went deep. My immediate reaction had been to queer it for her with Mark, but that would have been too simple. I wanted her to sweat, to have something hanging over her head. My larcenous nature saw the profit to be made from the extortion as well as the sweet revenge.

Frankly, she had destroyed me by pulling out. For a long while I couldn't get away from the bottle. My effectiveness as a hit man had been impaired to such a degree that I was told my services were no longer needed.

And all the time I'd kept telling myself that Sharon had not been that important to me.

Yeah . . .

I stirred around noon the next day. Larry Gibbons was watching TV. He hadn't been to a barber. He was still in denims. I said, "Hey, what gives?"

"I changed my mind."

"Are you crazy? Every cop in

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the city has your description by now."

"I'll take my chances," he said.

"Like hell you will! I gave you an order. Do it!"

His long thin frame came out of the chair. "I'm tired of taking your orders."

"Then get the hell out!"

"If that's the way you want it." Larry slammed the door behind him.

"Larry—"

He was gone, probably for good. I hated to lose him because he was smart. Most of the time he took direction well. I'd met him a few months ago in a bar on 47th and Ninth. I could tell right away he had potential. A few meetings later I was convinced he was the liaison man I was looking for.

Sharon had been married and settled down for a year. I was ready to bleed her. And I got Larry's okay after I convinced him that as far as being busted was concerned he had nothing to worry about.

Right now I wasn't so sure. If Sharon had gone to the cops, Larry would be picked up before the day was over. I had to find out for sure.

I dialed Sharon's number. There was no answer. My guess was that she was at police headquarters looking at mug shots. She had undoubtedly worked with a police artist on a sketch of Larry. The guy was hot. The cops would do their utmost to find the bleeder who dared threaten the tranquility of the department's favorite candidate. They'd find him, all right.

If I didn't find him first . . .

The shoulder holster felt tight, uncomfortable. I hadn't worn it in two years. I dropped my .45 into it. Using it on the kid was not what I'd wanted. But I had no choice. He was the only link. He had to be eliminated.

I had another worry. He was supposed to meet Sharon in the park for another payoff. If he hadn't stormed out of my apartment I would have told him to forget the pick-up. As things stood now, he would be there right on the dot of 10 p.m.—and find himself surrounded by cops.

I called Sharon again. No answer.

Ten minutes later I was in the dive on 47th and Ninth. The bartender hadn't seen Larry Gibbons in days. I tried the sleazy massage parlors on Seventh and Eighth, his favorite spas. No dice. It was getting late. A slew of pool halls and cocktail lounges later and I was ready to give up my search. The guy had vanished.

At 9 p.m. I headed for the

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park. The way I figured it Larry would make the pick-up even though he knew the place could be crawling with blue boys. Like most young punks, he was greedy, and this time the ten thou would be all his.

The area was dark and secluded. I knew it well because I had been the one who selected it as the site for the payoffs.

I didn't get too close. I couldn't see any cops, but they were there. I was sure of it. They had to be there.

Then I spotted Larry. The fool! I saw his long hair, the Fu Manchu, the denim jacket and pants. He was waiting for Sharon. He was up against some tall bushes with his hands in his pockets. If I thought I had half a chance of getting away with it, I'd ice him right were he stood.

Suddenly, there were three shots in quick succession. Larry's body twisted violently as he went down.

Christ!

I went rigid, expecting any minute to see and hear cops going wild in their search for the gun-wielder. I sank low and backed up under a bush.

The only thing that followed the shots, however, as silence. There had been no stakeout. Larry had walked into a trap of someone else's doing.

I felt hot metal on my temple. A voice said, "Don't move, Tony."

It was Sharon!

"Keep your hands where I can see them," she said, and I could feel her pulling at the .45 in my holster. After it was free she tossed it deep into the bushes. "Get up." She backed away to give me room.

I stood up. Sharon held what looked like a .38 Special, and not too steadily. "Take it easy with that thing," I told her.

"Tony—why? What did I ever do to you?"

I grunted.

"Was it because of Mark?"

I didn't answer.

"You knew the score, Tony. It was a temporary thing with us. It had to be."

"How'd you find out?"

"Never mind that. Tell me—why?" Sharon's voice cracked. I took a tentative step forward with the idea of knocking the gun down. She backed up quickly. "Don't try it, Tony. I killed your partner. I can kill you, too."

"Okay, baby, just relax. I don't want that thing going off." I was sweating. It was obvious that she didn't know how to handle the weapon. "What're you going to do?"

"Depends on your answers."

"Okay, okay, so you busted me apart. Are you satisfied? All I could think about was getting

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even. Now be careful with that gun."

"So you blackmailed me?"

"Yes! I wanted you to sweat." The gun was shaking in her hand. "I needed the money . . . Damn it, Sharon, put that gun down before it goes off!"

She did put the gun down, but before I could take any action the bushes came to life with detectives and uniformed policemen. Somebody said, "Okay, that's fine. We got it all on tape."

Handcuffs snapped over my wrists. A gruff voice yelled, "Hey, Pete, it's all over."

I saw Larry's body rise. The guy peeled off the mustache and wig and disappeared into the darkness.

I'd been set up but good—and tricked into confessing.

A detective relieved Sharon of the .38 Special. He said, "You didn't have to worry, Cicero. All blanks." He dumped them into the palm of his hand.

"Where's Larry?" I asked.

"We picked him up shortly after noon."

My eyes shifted to Sharon. "How'd you know?"

A thin smile played on her lips. "The twenty you gave me for cab fare. It had an X in the corner. I'd marked all the bills. Remember, Tony? It was one of the tricks you showed me . . . when we were close."

WHO KILLED JOHNNY ROSELLI?

by DAVID MAZROFF

It's True! It's Suspenseful! It's Due Next Month!

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MIRACLE CURE

by FREDERICK PAUL WALTER

When the gold-laden train failed to emerge from the tunnel, there followed a great falling out among the thieves who had worked out a plot to rob it en route.

ONCE THERE WAS A TRAIN that rode into a tunnel and disappeared.

Honest to God. I was there.

It happened in Arroyo City, about five years ago. A fat little crook with red hair came to town, calling himself Brother Barnaby. He said he was an agent of the Lord, and he set up a House of Healing which was popular with old ladies.

But his crookedest scheme involved robbing a train.

It went like this... Roy Hannon decided to move his bank from Arroyo City to Los Navalucillos, about twenty miles away. There was a new mine, and they wanted to bank their payroll with Roy. To move from one town to the other, he hired a train and four Pinkerton guards with Winchesters.

Brother Barnaby meant to dynamite that train, so he teamed up with the Morales gang. In a yellow Pontiac, they all waited a half-block from the station. When the hired train left, they left too. They knew they could outrace it, because the tracks ran uphill and the roadbed was poor.

Six miles from Arroyo City was a quarter-mile tunnel through Mt. Pozoblanco. Outside the far end of this tunnel

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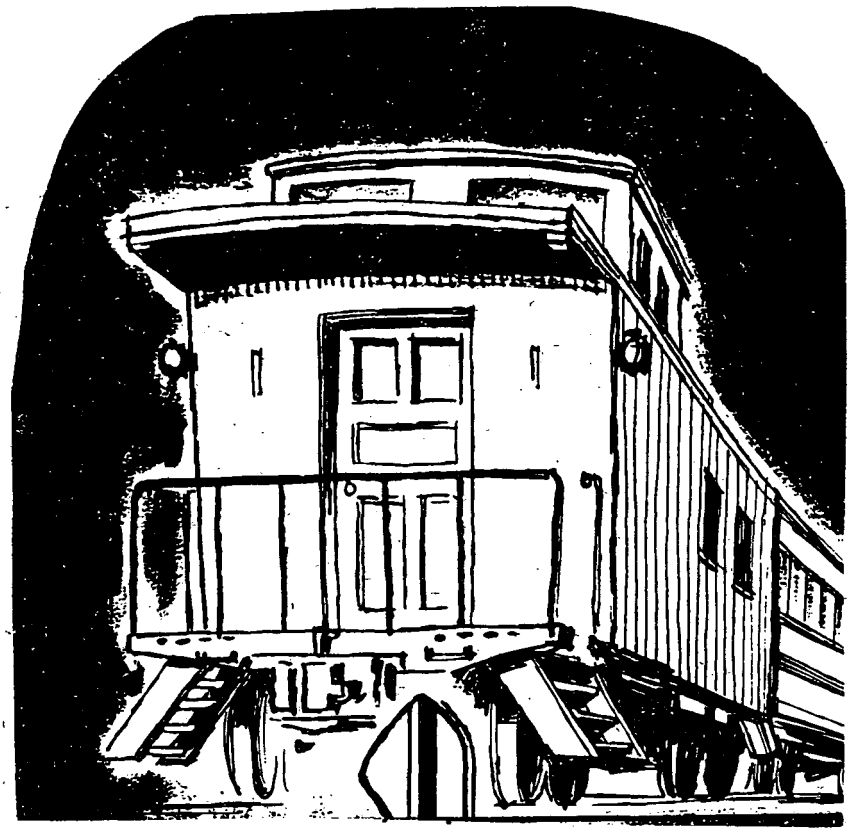

was their dynamite trap. In a gully, about a thousand feet from the trap, the Morales gang waited with the detonator. They couldn't see the train, and they couldn't hear it because they were upwind.

So they depended on Brother Barnaby to give them a signal. On a bluff across of the tracks, Barnaby lay between some creosote bushes. When Roy's train was out of the tunnel and near the trap, Barnaby was to flash a mirror and they'd explode the dynamite. Afterwards, they'd pull Roy's safe out of the wreckage and open it somewhere else. In their own sweet time.

That was the scheme. Clear?

Well, the train rolled up and went into the tunnel. I know it did because I saw it. On the

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other side, the Morales gang waited in their gully, watching for Barnaby's signal.

They waited. They watched.

No train.

No signal.

They climbed out of the gully. Brother Barnaby was down by the tracks, and he swore the train hadn't come out yet. So they walked through the tunnel, all the way to the other end. And they didn't find any trains inside.

That's where I got involved.

I was always interested in amateur film-work. That day, I had a camera and a half-hour of videotape, and I was shooting right by the entrance to the Mt. Pozoblanco tunnel. On a hillock to one side of the tracks, Mrs. Sanroma was doing a little dance. To her left was a cottonwood tree, to her right was a barrel cactus. She'd left all her clothes by the cactus.

It was a balanced composition. But the only way I could get it all in was to shoot from the hillock on the other side of the tracks. There I had my camera on a tripod.

I had been filming non-stop for about twenty-five minutes when the Morales gang came out of the tunnel. They didn't show in the viewfinder, so I guess they snuck up on me. There were four of them. Jose Figueroa and Bobby Perez wore cowboy togs, Angelo and Vicente Morales wore white suits with pastel neckties. They all had thin black pencil-line mustaches.

I quit filming.

Then things happened. Angelo pressed a pocket automatic against my left temple. Bobby Perez climbed a rock-spire and sighted down the tracks. Mrs. Sanroma put her clothes back on.

And there was Brother Barnaby, short and fat with red hair and big freckles. He had on sandles and a black cassock that buttoned down the front.

He said, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Taking movies."

"Pack up and scram."

"Sure." I detached the camera from the tripod. "I do little boys too."

He smiled without showing his teeth. "Just go away."

Bobby Perez came down from the rock spire. "There was no train to see anywhere. I could look as far as the town."

"*Mother of God!*" Angelo said.

He lowered his pocket automatic from my temple, and I stooped to close up the legs of my tripod. "If you're waiting for a train," I said, "you must have missed one."

Brother Barnaby stared at me like I had a tail with rattles on it. "Missed one? When?"

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"Ten, maybe fifteen minutes back."

"What kind of train?"

"Short one."

"Short?"

"Diesel switch engine, two mail cars, a caboose. Guards with rifles in the mail cars."

For all five of them that was enough.

A big explosion followed.

Every syllable I had spoken was the exact truth. But they couldn't accept that. It was a lie. Crazy. The train hadn't come. *Never*! I was a devil, and my mother slept with foot-soldiers.

I gave my oath it had gone into the tunnel. Then I turned to get corroboration from Mrs. Sanroma. But her clothes were gone and she was gone.

They circled around me again. They meant to hurt me.

"Hold on," I said. "I can prove it."

"How can you?" Angelo asked.

"I've got movies of it."

They stared at my camera with its half-hour of videotape.

Then they walked me through the tunnel, to Angelo's yellow Pontiac on the other side. We drove back to Arroyo City, to my room at the Hotel Carmencita. There I had a monitor with an eighteen-inch screen.

That little movie saved me.

You see, I had shot it in a single nonstop take—nearly a half-hour of uninterrupted action. I had been shooting about ten minutes when the train passed through. I had kept shooting for at least as long afterwards—up till the Morales gang arrived at my end of the tunnel.

I hadn't tampered with the tape, and they knew it. They had watched me. Once they screened it, they could tell it was nonstop.

What did it show? First, there was a lot of empty footage, then Mrs. Sanroma started dancing on the hillock. The railroad tracks were below camera level and you couldn't see them. But the mouth of the tunnel was in sight the whole time, in the lower left-hand corner of the shot.

Finally the train came along the track.

From right to left it moved slowly across the bottom of the screen. The camera picked up the upper half of it, cropping the wheels. There were a diesel switch engine and two cars. Viñes the engineer waved to the camera from the cabin window of the engine. The door of the second mail car was open, and one of the Pinkerton guards was standing in it. He waved, too.

Then the train entered the

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tunnel in the lower left-hand corner of the shot.

That was that.

The whole time, Mrs. Sanroma danced on her hillock. And she kept on dancing afterward for several more minutes.

Then the screen went blank.

"That's where you showed up," I said, "and I quit filming."

But I kept the monitor going to the end of the tape. About fifty feet were left, all empty. When I stopped shooting, I still had a little left over.

I ran it for them two more times. Then they believed me.

It looked like a case of Black Magic: 1) the train went into the tunnel—2) it didn't come out the other end—3) it didn't stay in the tunnel either—4) it just disappeared.

But the Morales gang were all Catholics and weren't allowed to believe in Black Magic. So they figured Barnaby was lying. They figured the train really had come out the other end. They were wrong. But that's what they figured.

After I turned off the monitor, Angelo Morales walked across the room. He hit Brother Barnaby on the mouth. *"Devil!"* he said.

"I don't know *what* the hell happened!" Barnaby said. "I don't *know*!" He dropped to his knees. His skin had gone so pale that his freckles looked purple.

They took him out of the room. The meant to hurt him.

APRIL THE YEAR BEFORE was when Brother Barnaby came to town. The bus from Fort Mack dropped off this fat, red-headed preacher at the Hotel Carmencita. He went inside and rented himself a suite. A whole goddam suite! Right beneath my own room.

The next day, he leased the old Burgos Inn from Roy Hannon and began remodeling it for his House of Healing.

The town got nosy. But my room was above his, so I was the best man to find out things. You see, I had a big register in one corner of my floor, and if I put my ear to it, I could hear talking from his suite. We added it all up. Apparently he really had been to a seminary, because he could talk Latin and argue about St. Augustine. But he'd spent two years in Joliet for sticking up a pet shop.

In Arroyo City, he seemed to make his money in two ways—by his religious racket and by plain criminal activity.

As a crook, he really beefed up our statistics. There were two Post Office robberies, Barney Webb's house got burgled and all his place settings were stolen. Three times the petty

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cash box disappeared from the Carmencita. When Roy Hannon threw a banquet for his silver anniversary, the carnage was terrible—2 gold lockets, 1 emerald brooch, 3 pearl necklaces, 2 ruby pendants and 6 earrings with fake diamonds. We weren't always sure Barnaby was the thief. Later it was a certainty.

Things disappeared when he was around. Which you've seen.

One day I wanted a glimpse inside the House of Healing, so I closed up my cigar store and walked down to Burgos St.

I stood by the hitching post and looked the place over. Above the porch was a neon sign that flashed in green letters, BROTHER BARNABY'S HOUSE OF HEALING. The windows were covered over with black paper that had little holes cut out of it in the shape of crosses.

The porch door opened and Brother Barnaby came out, short and fat and red-haired. He had on his black cassock. On hot days, all he wore under it were swimming trunks.

He didn't know me then. "You want something? If not, move on."

"Brother Barnaby, you have to help me." I cast around for an excuse and found one. "I've been seeing things."

"Have you. Like what?"

"Horrible, ugly things. Lizards and spiders and slugs."

"My God. *Where?*"

"Corner of my ceiling. Man-eating plants too."

I made my hands shake and my fingers twitch. He noticed and said, "My dear man, that's the D.T.'s."

Then I grabbed his sleeve with both my hands. "I want to lay off it, really I do. I'm begging you to help me. Please!"

"Poor desperate soul." His thick plushy lips put on a smile, and he guided me through his front door. In the vestibule was a pedestal with a big woven basket on it. He pointed. "In his eyes, the least amount is valuable."

I dropped a dime in.

"But the greater sacrifice earns the richer reward."

I dropped a dollar in.

"It's appreciated. Now go in there. Kneel. Wait."

The sanctuary was outfitted like a funeral parlor—candles, flowers, urns, plush sofas with velvet cushions. In the middle was a parlor piano, a spinet covered with a lace tablecloth. I knelt on a purple pillow, and after five minutes the others began to arrive—half the old ladies in Arroyo City.

As crooks went, Barnaby couldn't have fooled a drunken foreigner. But he had a talent for old ladies. He'd kiss them,

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escort them, and they doted, one and all. Each dropped a bill in the vestibule basket. Then it began. He sat at the piano and the ladies made a circle around him. They all had Salvation Army hymnals and did *A Mighty Fortress*. Then he stood up, took a censor, lit it and shook it around. After that he read a few Psalms, led them in prayers for their dead husbands and finished with a sermon.

That sermon stuck in my memory.

He said, "When the Lord performs a great miracle—as he did at Jericho, as he did at Babylon, as he did at the Red Sea—when the Lord performs such a miracle, it's a wonderful gift to those that witness it. He singles them out, he wants to assist them, encourage them along the path of righteousness."

The old ladies held their breaths.

Myself, I'd seen all I wanted. When they got up to sing again, I crawled between two of them, made it to the vestibule and escaped. It wasn't until I got back to my cigar store that I noticed one thing.

My wallet was gone.

VINES THE ENGINEER was a friend of mine. The morning after the train disappeared, I met him in the lobby of the Carmencita. He told me the train had arrived safely in Los Navalucillos—an hour after it was supposed to.

That afternoon I put my ear to the big register in one corner of my room. The Morales gang were with Brother Barnaby in his suite. They also knew about the train arriving safely. They were all yelling, so it was easy to hear what was said.

"See?" said Angelo Morales. "What a liar you are!"

All high and shaky, Barnaby's voice said, "I don't know what the hell happened to it!"

"You tried to cheat us!"

"*No!* I *didn't!*"

"You did, my friend, you *did*!" There was the sound of a slap.

"Dammit, it's *true*! That train never came!"

"*Liar*!"

"It never *came*! I swear to Christ!"

"You swear:" There was another slap. "You bring shame to the Virgin's son! Vicente, kneel on this man."

Thick carpets were all over Barnaby's suite, and I couldn't hear any footsteps.

But then Angelo said, "Good, Vicente. Now you. You would cheat us? You would get money from the guards? Maybe so?"

"There wasn't any train!"

"Wasn't?"

"*No*!"

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"*Pig*!" There was the sound of a match striking. A wooden match, I'd guess.

Angelo went on, "Hold his wrists, Vicente. So, the little white hairs. The little white hairs on the finger-joints. There. They burn like flax."

"*Owww*!" said Brother Barnaby.

"There was no train?"

"Believe me, there—*Owww*!"

"If there was no train, how did it get to Los Navalucillos? Tell me."

"I don't know."

"Did it fly there? Over the mountains?"

"I don't understand what in hell . . . *Owww*!"

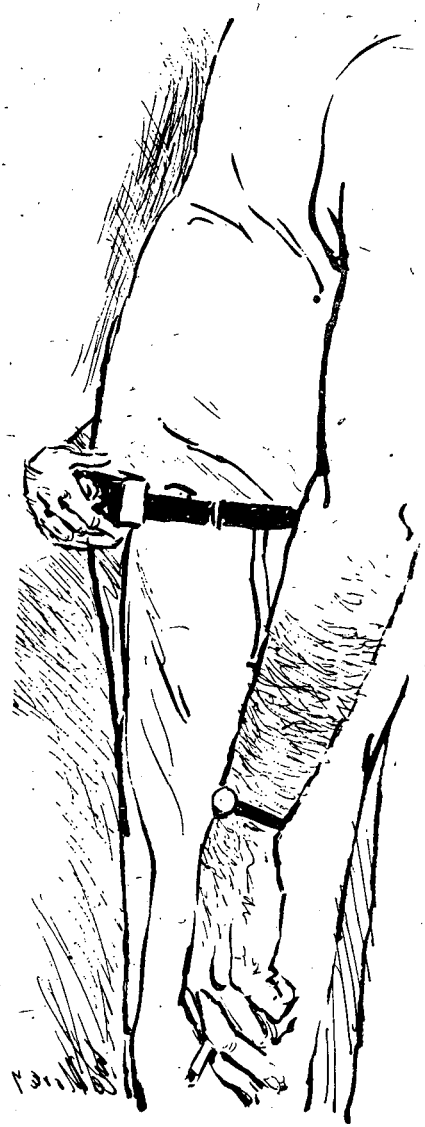
"A train goes into a tunnel. It does not stay there. You say it does not come out. A miracle?"

"*Owww*!"

"No—a lie. Because the train reaches its destination." There was the sound of a second match striking. "Vicente, remove his shoes. We will do the toe-joints."

Well, they kept after him for quite a while. I left the register, reached into my little bedside bureau for the pint of Scotch I keep there.

I had been away only a minute or two, but when I went back to the register all was quiet in Barnaby's suite. Nothing was going on. I listened for maybe ten minutes, long



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enough to need more Scotch. So I left the register for good.

My window was open. About twenty minutes later I heard, outside, an odd scratching, scuffling sound.

A hand came up over the ledge.

I ran over. Getting him by the elbows, I pulled his fat little body across the sill and into the room.

It was Brother Barnaby, dressed in his black cassock—but barefoot. His right eye was blue and puffy. A scab of dried blood stuck in the corner of his mouth. I put him on the bed and gave him my glass of Scotch. He drank it in two swallows.

"So they punched you up," I said.

He looked at me with the eye that wasn't puffy. "It didn't fly."

"What didn't?"

"It."

"It?"

"That train. It didn't fly over the mountain."

I reached behind him, stacked and plumped the pillows so he could lean against them. "Just relax. Rest a bit."

His fat lips shook. "It vanished."

"Easy."

"It must be a sign from the Lord."

"Just relax."

He made odd low humming sounds. "It has to be a m-m-m. . ." Finally he got it out. "A miracle! It has to be a miracle."

"Let me fix you some soup. Will he come looking for you?"

"If I don't repent."

"I mean Angelo Morales."

"Him? Yes, he said he'd kill me."

I fixed him an ice-pack instead of soup. Then he told me what happened. Angelo Morales wanted to hang him by his ankles and leave him there so all the blood would rush to his head. But they needed clothesline, and they were hungry because they had missed lunch. So they locked Barnaby in the bathroom and left. He climbed out the window and up to my room.

"Any time now," I said, "they'll be up here looking for you. And I've got no place to hide you." I had one room with bath. There were a bed, a closet, a bureau, a dresser, an armchair, a tub, a toilet and a hot plate. Not one reasonable hiding place.

He stared at me wide-eyed.

I went on, "I have to get you out of here. You've got to leave Arroyo City for good. Go far away, so they'll never get to you."

Sitting on my bed, he listened with open mouth—like I

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was the voice from the burning bush.

"There's a bus at four-fifteen heading for Fort Mack. You get on it."

He nodded, still in a trance.

"At Fort Mack you connect with the Union Pacific. Get a ticket for as far away as you can. Albuquerque, maybe. San Diego, if you can afford it."

He kept nodding.

"If you get that far, you'll be okay. You'll be safe out of their reach."

He nodded a third time, but not at me. His eyes, looking upward, stayed wide open. There was a yellowish color to his skin, and little drops of sweat kept sliding down a cut over his right eye.

Suddenly he pulled himself up.

He knelt on the bedsheets. His hands were crossed over his chest in the old-fashioned prayer style. It looked hokey. But when he spoke, it was in a high, light voice, almost a kid's voice.

"You showed me, O Lord," he said. "I am evil. Always evil. I'm the worst kind of evil—an evil priest." He said it simply. No scenery chewing. "O Lord," he went on, "you gave me encouragement to change. You gave me a sign of your love. You showed me a miracle. Now I can't be evil. I must try to be good. Believe me, O Lord, I will try."

"I hope so," I said. "Not let's find you some shoes."

He kept going. "Today there are few miracles. But you've shown me one, O Lord. It was a gift, a wonderful gift. You singled me out. You assisted me, brought me to good, gave me a final chance to rescue myself. Thank you."

The eyes stayed wide open, the voice stayed like a kid's. I hadn't heard him cuss for awhile. Maybe it meant he'd fallen for his own pitch. Maybe it meant he'd converted himself.

Because a train rode into a tunnel and disappeared? Naw, couldn't be.

I put a hand on his shoulder and got him to sit down. "Have any money?"

"Yes."

"On you?"

"Yes. Sixty dollars."

"Okay. We've got a half-hour before that bus to Fort Mack. Go wash up."

He did, then put on a pair of my boots. They were too long for him, but I said to keep them and work with them. Then he was ready. At four o'clock we headed to the door to catch that bus.

Sure enough, somebody knocked.

I motioned him to hide in the

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bathroom. There was another knock.

"Yeah?" I called out.

"It is Angelo Morales."

"Who?"

"Angelo Morales. And my brother Vincente. And my two friends."

"Oh yeah. I remember you."

"We may come in?"

"Sure. But I'm not dressed. Can I get some pants on?"

"Of course."

I looked around, wondering where in hell I could hide him. Behind the window curtains? No, they didn't reach to the floor. Under the bed? No, they'd look there for sure. Out the window and back down to his own suite? No, he'd never make it.

The register. Sure.

Its grate was a yard wide. I lifted it. The flue was wide too, definitely wide enough for me. But Brother Barnaby? I shuddered.

Fat as he was, he made it. He was plenty scared. I replaced the grate, made sure it was in the closed position, then moved the armchair on top of it. I wondered if he'd come out again without a poumber.

I let them in.

Angelo and Vicente Morales, José Figueroa, Bobby Perez. They all had pencil-line mustaches. José and Bobby wore cowboy togs, Angelo and Vicente wore white suits with pastel neckties.

I took my wallet out. "Six dollars. You're sure it's worth it?"

"Shut your mouth." Angelo pushed past me.

Both brothers carried their pocket automatics. Vicente had me face the wall and pressed his gun between my shoulder blades. It barely took them a minute to search the room. They looked in the bathroom, they looked in the closet, they looked under the bed. They also looked behind the armchair. That was as warm as they got.

Angelo came back to me. "Turn around, my friend. Fingers behind the neck." I did what he said. "Have you been here for a long time today?"

"Since noon."

"What were you doing?"

"Sleeping."

"Oh. Then you would not notice anything?"

"Depends. Looking for Brother Barnaby?"

Angelo raised his eyebrows, then squinted. "You have heard something about our friend, perhaps?"

"Haven't heard anything. Saw him climb out his window though."

"He climbed out? When did you see this?"

"Over an hour ago. Made a ruckus, woke me up."

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"Tell me about this. He climbed in here?"

"What good would that do him? Hell no. He climbed to the ground."

"To the ground? As far as that?"

"It's fifteen feet. He lived."

Angelo took two cigars from his lapel pocket. One was for me, and he shoved it in my mouth and lit it. "He dropped to the ground? Now, my friend, where then did he go?"

"He walked into the street, flagged down a bus, climbed on."

"It was a bus going to where?"

"El Generaliffe."

Angelo swore a long, loud oath. Then he snapped his fingers, and the other three followed him out the door. They didn't wait for the elevator. They took the stairs.

Looking out the window, I saw Angelo's yellow Pontiac pass the hotel and head north to El Generaliffe. They'd be busy for the next three hours. Enough time to get the holy man safely aboard a bus heading the opposite direction.

But we had only a few minutes to catch that bus. I pulled the grate from the register and began tugging. He came out like a gopher, blinking at the light. His red hair and chubby cheeks were covered with cobwebs. One of the boots I had given him was lost down the flue.

There wasn't time to wash up or to fish for the boot. I led him, barefoot again, downstairs and out into the street. He caught the bus with maybe a second left over.

Before climbing aboard, he took my right hand in both of his. "I will say prayers for you. Every night this coming year."

He almost seemed like he meant it.

Impossible!

The bus pulled out, and Arroyo City was through with him. Roy Hannon turned the House of Healing into a rest home and wrote it off.

IT WAS VIÑEZ the engineer who told me, a year later, what happened to Brother Barnaby. The preacher had gone to Nevada and spent his money helping a tribe of Paiutes. He was living and working with them.

Last month I moved to Nevada myself. Reno. To live with my sister.

There was a convention in town, at the Hotel Washoe, of Paiutes and Shoshones. I stopped off at the hotel for a drink in the lounge—and there he was in the lobby. Still short and fat, he didn't wear a black cassock any more, but khaki.

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He claimed he remembered me but couldn't recall my name. I reminded him. His face looked the same, with big freckles and no wrinkles. But his red hair was all the way down to his shoulders.

He wouldn't join me in the lounge, so we went to a little breakfast place and had coffee.

At first he did the talking. "I can't forget Arroyo City," he said. "A place that taught me the lesson of my life."

"That miracle of the train?"

"That miracle, yes. It rescued me from myself. I thank the lord."

He went on talking about himself—his missionary work, his dealings with the government, with lawyers, with social workers and anthropologists. He mentioned his efforts to raise money for the Indians by selling jewelry, paintings and holiday cards. All the time he talked, his eyes were wide-open and his voice was high and light like a kid's. He still seemed like he meant it.

But I still wondered if it was phony.

After five years, I figured the truth ought to be of interest to him. I told him, "I suppose you're old enough to take it."

"Eh?"

"That train thing. It wasn't a miracle. It was just a trick we played on you."

He didn't stop smiling. "A trick?"

"That's right. I thought it up myself. No miracle."

Air blew over him from a fan on the counter, picking up his long red hair and making the ends dance. He said, "Explain it to me."

"It's easy. That videotape I showed to all of you—I ran it in reverse."

His smile went away, and he stroked his lower lip with a fat fore-finger. "I understand. So when you filmed it, the train wasn't really entering the tunnel."

"That's correct. It was backing out."

The whole story unfolded. I admitted I had heard him through the register, plotting the robbery with the Morales gang. I had told Roy Hannon and some other people about it. We had decided Brother Barnaby needed some outwitting.

Roy borrowed me the videotape equipment from a TV station in Fort Mack. On the train to Los Navalucillos, Mrs. Sanroma and I both went along—with the equipment of course. Viñes, the engineer, dropped us off outside the Mt. Pozoblanco tunnel, took the train inside it and waited. After handwinding the tape several yards, I began filming. Viñes waited ten minutes, released

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the brake and let the train coast backwards out of the tunnel and through the scene I was shooting. Then he let out the throttle and returned to Arroyo City. I kept filming till Barnaby and the Morales gang showed up.

The movie was perfect. There wasn't a thing on it that didn't look good when shown in reverse. While we screened it on the monitor back at the Carmencita, Viñes made a second run to Los Navalucillos. That time Roy's money went all the way.

"No miracle," I repeated. "But it produced a sound result."

He was smiling again. Then he began to laugh. His chin sank against his neck, making a fold of flesh bulge over his khaki collar. He laughed more than a minute.

Then he shook my hand. "It's all the same," he said. "I thought it was the lord's miracle. But it was yours. *You* were the lord's tool."

I couldn't manage his logic. "That so?"

"You were. It was you who set my foot on the path of righteousness. I thank you." He shook my hand again.

Maybe we had done him a good turn.

After a while I walked him back to the Hotel Washoe. He had a fundraising affair or something. We shook hands a third time, and I went to the lounge for my drink.

It wasn't until I sat at the bar that I noticed one thing.

My wallet was gone.

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A New Story

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There'll Be Some Changes Made

by DON WALL

PAUL JONES, CHIEF of Police and Fire Chief of Tyler, Idaho, returned the mayor's hostile stare with equal dislike. Jones had a good idea of why Gary Stout was in his office, and he wasn't about to make things easy for him.

"Uh, Paul, I suppose you read the editorial in the *Free Press* last week?"

"Looked it over." In fact, Jones knew it well. It was an attack on him, the third in two months. The editor was the mayor's man, and Paul knew where the ideas had come from.

"I talked the matter over with the City Council, and a majority agrees with the points raised. Nothing personal, Paul, but this town has just got to modernize. We got Main Street paved—"

"Gary, you ain't here to talk about pavin,' I take it. If you've got somethin' to say, say it." It was happening to him again, Paul noted—the lapsing into exaggerated rural speech whenever he talked with someone who thought of him as an ignorant hick, almost as if he had to provide proof of the other's conception of him.

The mayor, in turn, became even more formal, as if to emphasize the contrast between them. "Very well, Paul, let me set forth the reasons why we believe your resignation would be appropriate."

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The Mayor wanted Chief Jones to retire so that his nephew could have the job. But that was before Jones got to work on the Bontley murder.

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The mayor began his now-familiar litany—the job was too big for one man—they could hire a high-powered specialist for each job, bright, well-trained young men—the town was growing rapidly with the expansion of the State College—the crime rate was rising—Paul was really only a fifty-year-old ex-cowboy who had, of course, served well for ten years, but things were getting too complex to be handled in old-fashioned ways, etc., etc.

Paul had to admit to himself that some of the points made sense, but he was a proud man. In the beginning he had taken the job after his wife died, just for something different to occupy his mind. In time, though, he had grown to like the town and the job.

He had worked hard at it and had done well, and he'd be damned if he'd be railroaded out of office by Gary Stout, who spent more time acting like a good mayor than being one. An angry counter-attack was on his lips when he was saved the effort by the ring of the phone.

"Chief? This is Max, down at the tavern. You better get down here right away. Jeff Bontley just died. Doc Parsons is here, and he says he doesn't like the looks of it. Said to call you."

"What happened?"

"Jeff started actin' real crazy and then he just keeled over."

"You mean Doc thinks it might be murder?" Paul asked. The mayor leaned forward, open-mouthed. "Okay, I'll be right down. Keep everybody there."

"What's this about a murder?" asked Stout. Hastily, Paul told him the little he knew.

"You're not going to try to investigate this yourself, are you?"

"Sure am," Paul replied. "That's my job—and I ain't resigned it yet."

"For Heaven's sakes, call in a State Police Investigator! What do you know about homicide investigation? Why, you'll probably foul up the evidence so the case will never be solved!"

"Call them yourself, if you want," Paul snapped. "I'll be down at Max's." Going out the door, he saw the mayor reaching for the telephone.

As Paul put the cruiser in gear and headed for the tavern, he reviewed what he knew of Jeff Bontley and concluded he wasn't much of a loss. Jeff had inherited his dad's 2,500 acre wheat ranch and the wealth hadn't set well. He had started boozing and womanizing, messing with local coeds, barmaids, professors' wives—anything in skirts.

When his wife complained

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about his stallion ways, he beat up on her. She put up with it for about a year, then divorced him. He had beaten up plenty of men, too. Bontley was around thirty, big, powerful, a fearsome barroom brawler. Heck, there must be twenty men in town who would have been happy to do him in if they had the chance.

As he entered the tavern, Paul saw Bontley stretched out on the floor, Doc Parsons kneeling beside the body. Doc was questioning the half-dozen men grouped around, taking notes in a spiral pad.

"Howdy, Doc. What have you found out?"

"Oh, Paul. Glad you're here." Doc stood up and consulted his notebook. "According to these witnesses, Bontley started to complain about not feeling well around a half-hour ago. Said he was thirsty but couldn't swallow. He became very talkative, but confused and rambling, inarticulate.

"He became progressively quarrelsome and tried to pick a fight with Max over the beer. Said it tasted like garlic. Max and these other men were going to throw him out, thinking he was drunk, when he collapsed. Max called me right away, but when I got here about five minutes ago, he was dead. I'd suspect some kind of poisoning, but I'm no expert on this kind of thing."

"It was just after the fight," interjected Max, "but that couldn't have done it. Hell, that prof never laid a hand on him."

"Wait a minute, hold on! What fight? Who with?" said Paul.

"It's like this, Chief. This guy came in, a prof at the college, name of Olsen, I think. He's been in here a few times before. He had a beer, then after a while he came over to where Jeff was sittin' and told him to stay away from his wife. Jeff laughed and said somethin' about her needin' a real man and the prof dumped his beer down Jeff's neck, so Jeff jumped up and did a number on him.

"Hit him a couple of times in the belly and that was it. It was over so fast I didn't even have time to try and stop it. Soon as he could get his breath, Olsen went out without sayin' another word. Jeff, he thought it was a big joke. He was laughin', and right after that was when he started sayin' he felt sick."

The door opened and a heavy-set man wearing a trim blue suit and a look of authority hurried in. Spotting Paul's uniform, he approached and introduced himself.

"Chief? I'm Lieutenant Mills, State Investigative Division.

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We got an urgent call from your mayor saying you needed help on a possible homicide. I was in the area so I came right over."

"Glad to meet you, Lieutenant. This here's Doc Parsons, and this is Max Martin. He owns this place. They can fill you in."

Paul was acutely aware of the contrast in appearance and manner they made. This Mills looked and acted like a cop, while he looked like the ex-cowboy he was. Tall, lanky, leathery skin—usually slow-moving, not the kind to waste energy.

Not a great hand with words, either, unless he had something to say. Even that bug-brain, the mayor, could outtalk him. That man's mouth ran like a sick bird's rear. Heck, he was becoming too sensitive. Maybe all that criticism was getting to him.

As the lieutenant questioned Doc and Max, Paul tried to think of something official-looking to do, so he knelt down by the body. Suddenly he leaned closer as he caught a faint whiff of another odor mingling with the smell of spilled beer.

It was a kind of fishy odor, like clams, and a little like rubbing alcohol and maybe benzene and—yes—garlic. A darned odd combination. Paul knew he had smelled it before, but where?

Lieutenant Mills broke in on Paul's thoughts. "Chief, the lab boys should be here any minute. They'll analyze the beer he was drinking, things like that. I've asked Max to call for an ambulance to transport the body over to Coeur d'Alene. The pathologist there will do the autopsy."

"Fine, fine," said Paul, still preoccupied with that scent.

"Meanwhile, maybe we'd better go and have a talk with this Olsen. Do you know where he lives?"

"Think so. He's got a few acres about five miles out on Depot Springs Road. I've noticed the name on the mailbox. Let's go, Lieutenant."

In the course of the fifteen-minute drive out to Olsen's, Paul's reaction to the lieutenant changed. He had been prepared to dislike Mills, largely, he recognized, because the mayor had brought him in on the case. But he found the man to be tough, professional and cooperative. Bob Mills made it clear, without saying so in so many words, that he considered his association with Paul a partnership, not a competition.

As Paul drove the cruiser up Olsen's gravel driveway, its headlights illuminated the

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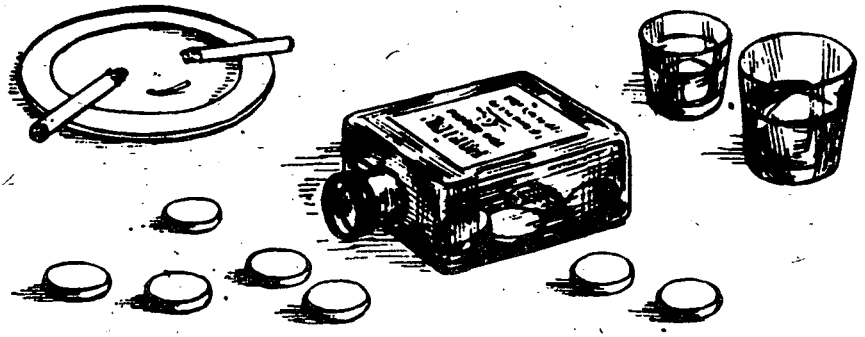

split-rail cedar fencing of a corral on the left. Several horses, heads stretched over the top bar, ears up, stared curiously at them. Paul stared idly back, then tensed as he made the connection. Horses. Of course! Now he knew where he had smelled that strange odor before.

The house was a modest-sized ranch-style with basalt facing. Osen opened the door to their knock. He was a slim, nervous-acting man who kept running his hand over his dark curly hair. Paul introduced himself and the lieutenant and let Mills explain the circumstances of their call.

"Bontley is dead? Under suspicious circumstances? But what has that got to do with me?" asked Olsen.

"We understand that you were involved in an altercation with the deceased a short time before his death. We'd like to ask you a few questions about it," Mills explained. "Why were you in the tavern?"

"To have a beer—why else? I stop in there every so often after I've finished teaching for the day."

"Did you know that Bontley would be there?"

"Of course not. I'd never seen him there before."

"Why did you pick a fight with him?"

"I've been going through a frustrating time, and I guess I just blew up when I saw him grinning there. My wife isn't here now—she's in Fresno, staying with her sister for a few weeks. It's no big secret that our marriage hasn't been going too well, and she wanted to get away to think things over."

"Your wife is having an affair with another man. You pick a fight with him, and he dies shortly afterwards. How

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does that look to you, Olsen?"

"Frankly, I don't give a damn how it looks. If you're implying I killed him, you're crazy. Just how did I do that? I suppose he died from a broken fist, from hitting me in the stomach. Or maybe he drowned in the beer I poured on him?"

"The fact remains that you had both motive and opportunity," Mills said.

"Oh, I'm not denying I hated him. Wouldn't you, if a slob like that was breaking up your marriage? But there must be a lot of others who hated him, too. His behavior around here is well known. I don't think I'm going to answer any more questions. If you want to accuse me of murder, then arrest me. Otherwise, go away and stop bothering me!"

"This is just routine questioning, professor," Mills said. "We're not accusing you of anything."

"Yet." At Paul's quiet but forceful interjection, both men looked at him, startled. "Let's go, Lieutenant. Professor Olsen, we'll be in touch."

As they drove away, Bob Mills asked Paul, "Are you on to something, Chief? You put a lot of emphasis in that 'yet.'"

"Maybe, Bob. I've got some checking to do first. Just a hunch right now. I'll let you know if it pans out."

Chief Jones was busy the next day. First he paid a call on the local veterinarian. From there he went to the college library, where he spent over an hour checking books and circulation records and taking notes. His investigation was interrupted when he had to rush out to help fight a small brush fire along the railroad tracks north of town. By the time he finished, he was almost ready to agree with the mayor that he had at least one job too many.

When he got back to the office, he called a pathologist he knew in Spokane and talked for half an hour, taking more notes. Finally he called four opthalmologists and six pharmacies before he relaxed, satisfied.

That evening he got a call from Mills. "Chief? I have the lab report on the beer. That's all it was, just plain beer. The pathologist thinks Bontley was poisoned, but he's baffled so far as to what it might have been. He's tried a number of tests but hasn't come up with anything. How about you—have you made any headway with that hunch of yours?"

"Think I may have, Bob." Paul fished out his notebook. "Got a pad there? Okay, ask that pathologist of yours to test for—uh—$C_{17}H_{23}O_3N$. Stuff called Atropine."

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"Hey, what's up?"

"Been digging around some. Think I got most of it figured out, but there's a missing piece, even if I'm right about the poison. Bob, I know you must be gettin' curious, but I'd just as soon hold back till I'm more sure of what I've got. Okay?"

"I guess so, if that's the way you want it. I'll tell you what. If your lead about the poison checks out, why don't I drive in tomorrow afternoon and meet you at your office?"

"Fine. I'll look for you around four."

Paul was up early the next morning, as always. He dressed, walked out to the pasture, and forked alfalfa hay out to the ten horses that crowded around him for their breakfast. Then he drove the six miles into Tyler for his own.

As he entered the café, Marlene Jacobs greeted him warmly, put coffee and orange juice in front of him, and started his eggs on the griddle. Then she scooped up the latest edition of the *Free Press* and handed it to him.

"I don't know whether this will spoil your digestion or not, Paul. Our dear mayor is still after you, looks like."

Paul read the hastily-inserted front page story about Jeff Bontley's suspicious death. The sparse account ended with an invitation to *See Editorial, Page 4.*

It was more of the same. *The mysterious death of a respected member of our community*—Paul snorted—*points up once again the need for competent, well-trained, professional law-enforcement in our town. Certainly we are all grateful to our present Chief of Police for his long and honorable service, but the time has come*—

"Don't you pay any attention to that horse kintrocky," said Marlene, sliding a full plate in front of him. "I heard a rumor that the mayor has a policeman nephew someplace in California. Couldn't be that he's got a new police chief in mind already, could it?

"And another thing. A lot of the people who come in here complain about the way Gary's doin' his job. I'd guess that he's worried about gettin' re-elected, so he's runnin' around tryin' to convince everyone that he's our great progressive leader. But don't you worry—you've got lots of friends in this town."

"Looks like I'll need 'em, Marlene." Paul smiled at her. "Anyway, the mayor doesn't bother me. Not now."

He sauntered out onto the main street, idly watching the stores being opened and some children engaging in horseplay on their way to school. A group

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of young boys was fooling around, wrestling, squirting each other, filling the fine spring air with their high, raucous voices.

Paul watched them casually, worrying about the missing link in his case. Suddenly his eyes narrowed and he moved swiftly toward one boy. He grabbed the startled boy, examined what he had in his hand, then hurried into Zinkworth's Variety Store. When he came out ten minutes later, he looked smug.

Mills arrived at the office promptly at four.

"Howdy, Bob, anything new?"

"You old fox, how the hell did you know? I got a call from the pathologist an hour ago, and you were right. It was atropine. He said the stuff is very hard to detect unless you have a very good idea of just what to look for."

"Let's go pick Olsen up, Bob. I'm enjoyin' this, so if you can rein in your curiosity a little longer, I'll spit it all out when we talk to our murderer."

Olsen greeted them cautiously but invited them into the living room. "Well, gentlemen, what now? Have you Sherlocks tracked down the poisoned beer?"

"It wasn't the beer, but it was poison," Paul said. "You're under arrest—suspicion of murder." Paul read Olsen his rights while the man gaped at him, shocked.

"That's absurd!" Olsen said when Paul finished. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

"I believe I do," Paul replied. "As the lieutenant here said, you had the motive and the opportunity, and now I know how you did it."

"All right—how?" Olsen challenged.

"First off, I've gotta mention that I raise horses—got me some real nice Appaloosas on my place. Well, vet's fees bein' what they are, a man's got to learn to do a lot of his horse doctorin' himself. Got me an old mare I'll probably have to get rid of one of these days, but I'm real fond of that old gal and I hate to do it."

"What has that got to do with this?" Mills asked.

"That's what gave me the clue. That old mare's got arthritis pretty bad, and on damp days she can hardly get around. I hated to see her suffer, so I asked Doc Fournier if he had somethin' that'd give her relief.

"Turns out that he did, a drug called DMSO. Dimethyl sulfoxide. Bob, you remember that Bontley was going to fight Max because the beer tasted like garlic?"

"Yes," said the puzzled Mills,

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"but the man was raving incoherently."

"Sure, but that part of it made sense. This DMSO is a miracle drug. Seems it penetrates the skin and tissues as soon as it touches you. Put it on a sprain or arthritic joint and you get instant relief. I put some of it on my mare, old Patchy, and about ten seconds after I touched it I tasted garlic.

"Anyway, I smelled this funny odor near Bontley's mouth. It's darned hard to describe, but nothin' else smells that way. I smelled that same odor on the mare's breath after I'd rubbed the DMSO on her legs."

"If it has such a distinctive odor, why didn't the doctor who first examined Bontley notice it?" Mills asked.

"The government took it off the market for use on people seven or eight years ago. It never was in wide use, so Doc Parsons probably never had any experience with it. But you can get all you want from a vet and, according to Doc Fournier, he sold Olsen here a pint several weeks ago."

"What does that prove?" Olsen asked. "Lots of people around here keep horses besides me, and I'm sure others must have bought DMSO. Besides, it isn't a poison."

"True. So I called a pathologist friend of mine in Spokane and told him about Jeff's symptoms. He was real helpful. Told me about several poisons you could have used. Told me which would be easy to get, and in what forms. I also went over to the college library. Found out you'd checked out a couple of books on poisons a month ago."

"So what?" asked Olsen tensely. "What kind of evidence is that?"

"There's more," Paul continued. "From the symptoms Jeff had, Atropine seemed like the best bet. It comes from the roots of *Atropa Belladona,* the deadly nightshade. It's extremely poisonous." Paul got his notebook out.

"Says here the symptoms are 'excessive thirst, dryness of throat and mouth, difficulty swallowing—talkative, confused, may become quarrelsome, coma, collapse.' Just the way Jeff acted. The pathologist who did the autopsy found plenty of traces of it, once he knew what to test for."

"Are you claiming I dug up this plant, whatever it was, and made a poison out of the roots?" Olsen asked. "That's crazy—I can hardly tell a marigold from a dandelion!"

"Nope. Stuff doesn't grow around here, anyway," Paul

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said. "But there's easier ways to get it. In eyedrops, for example. Eye doctors use it in treating some eye diseases." Paul consulted his notes again.

"Two weeks ago you were treated by an opthalmologist in Spokane for eyeritis. The doc prescribed atropine. He tells me he warns all his patients about using it because it can be so poisonous. You filled the prescription that same day at the Cost-Less Pharmacy. Still got the bottle around, Olsen?"

"No. I threw it out. I never keep medicines around after I use them."

"That so? I wonder if we looked in your medicine cabinet if we'd find any outdated medicines you'd kept." Olsen looked startled. "Anyhow, this atropine comes in an aqueous solution, which means it's dissolved in water. So what you did is let the water evaporate. What you had left was crystals of a deadly poison, which you dissolved in DMSO."

Paul paused for a reaction from Olsen. Getting none, he continued.

"So we've got the poison and the vehicle, you might say. The only part that puzzled me was how you administered it. Some kids solved that part of it for me this morning. Saw one of 'em squirt another with a trick ring. There's a bulb on it. You fill it with water, squeeze it, and the water squirts out. You still got yours, Olsen?"

Olsen said nothing, but his face was white and set, his eyes cold.

"The boy got his ring at Zinkworth's, so I checked there this morning. A man answering your description bought one a few days ago. The clerk is sure she can identify the man.

"So what you did, Olsen, is fill your trick ring with that poisonous solution. Then you went to Max's, where you knew Jeff spent a lot of time, and picked a fight with him. You squirted him with the poison, then right after dumped your beer on him, so he wouldn't suspect anything. The beer was camouflage. You let Jeff beat on you, but that's sure one fight he lost. That's the way it was done. Right?"

For a moment, Paul didn't think Olsen would answer. Then he said softly, "Yes. That's exactly the way it happened. But I never thought a hick cop would be able to figure it out—and so soon!"

"The mayor's going to have a hard time believing it, too," said Paul, smiling at Mills' inquiring look.

Paul had one of his patrolmen drive Olsen in to the County Jail for booking. He intended to take Mills up on his

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offer of a cold beer, on duty or not.

As the two men were about to go into Max's, they met the mayor and Ron Richards, Editor of the *Free Press,* coming out. Paul made the introductions.

"Paul, no offence meant by that editorial," said Richards, while the mayor smiled hypocritically, "but we honestly do feel that it's best for you to retire. I'm sure you're helping the lieutenant here as much as you can, but there's no substitute for modern, scientific training. This apparent murder only highlights our need for—"

"Why, you idiot!" Mills said. "The murderer has just confessed and been arrested, and Paul here is the one who cracked the case!" Mills went on with some heat to give the details. When we had finished, the mayor turned to Paul with a sour smile.

"Well, Chief, I guess you are to be congratulated. You'll be the town hero." He paused. "I assume there is no question now about your resigning."

"Oh, I'm going to resign, all right. Tomorrow morning, in fact." He smiled at the mayor's surprise. "A lot of what you guys said is true. I'm not near as bad as you fellas made out, but maybe it is time for a change, just like you said. Heck, it was just a fluke that I solved that case. We all know I was just lucky that things fell the way they did."

The mayor recovered quickly. "Chief, I think it's very big of you to admit your shortcomings. We do need change—can't hang on to the old forever, eh? Well, what will you do now, retire at your ranch and raise horses?"

Paul paused in the tavern doorway. "No, don't think I will. You gave me a better idea. I'm going to run for mayor. Like you've been sayin,' gents, maybe this town needs some changes."

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INCIDENT AT THE BRIDGE

When the Planterville drawbridge rose to block rush hour traffic, only one man knew why—and he would talk only to the right man.

by NAN HAMILTON

THE KNUCKLES OF HIS BIG bony hands whitened with effort as Ray Ascher carefully pulled himself up the iron ladder, favoring his bad leg. He fished in the pockets of his scuffed brown leather jacket for a key and unlocked the steel door that led into his small kingdom, the Planterville bridgehouse.

Of course the compact control room was not his kingdom—his kingdom was the river, brown and muddy, sliding under the bridge and the city streets that stretched away from it. O'Hare, the night man, was on leave, so nothing disturbed the pristine order of Ascher's domain.

He surveyed the small room with satisfaction—desk neat with log books and his typewriter in place, the percolator clean and waiting on the hot plate, the controls polished, the door to the small toilet decently closed, his books in ordered rows against the wall.

The river was never navigated at night but O'Hare was the city's backup against emergencies and so must be tolerated, cigars and all.

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He pulled the big gold watch from his pocket and its worn face assured him he could take his time, brew a pot of coffee and enjoy his guardianship of the sleeping city. The river would not be navigated for another hour. He hung his jacket neatly on a peg and turned on the short wave radio to the police calls. They held more interest for him than the wake-up music of the local disc jockey. He lit the hot plate, put on the coffee and indulged in his morning pastime of watching the early bird traffic as he waited for the perk.

Absently, he noted the rumbling progress of the Co-op miok truck on its way to Carson, the industrial complex across the river. Milk and produce trucks and an occasional salesman were about the only traffic across the bridge this early.

That one's in a hurry, he thought as a small blue Chevy rocketed across the bridge into Planterville. *An accident on its way to happen, sooner or later.*

It burned rubber and screeched to a stop to avoid a produce truck turning onto the ramp. Out of habit, he picked up his binoculars from the window shelf and focussed on the license plate. He noted it down with the time, as he always did. One more precise entry in the log of his days. No one ever looked at the log, but Ray had a careful, exact mind and hoarded bits of information like a pack rat. He frowned at the latest entry briefly, then shut the book and placed it into its place on the desk.

The coffee was ready, so he poured himself a cup, unwrapped the Danish that served for breakfast and sat down to read the latest acquisition to his library, a police procedural by John Creasey. It was as close as he could come to the real thing. He read through the Danish and another cup of coffee and checked his watch. Morgan, the motorcycle officer, should be taking his station at the bridge ramp by now to monitor the morning traffic rush. They had a waving acquaintance, a small ritual which seemed an important part of the day to Ascher. He stood up and went to the window overlooking the ramp.

Morgan was there, sitting at ease astride his bike, watching the still moderately slow traffic funneling into the narrow street which led to the bridge. Ascher tapped on the glass and waved. Morgan glanced up and waved back, his good-looking young face lit by a smile, then resumed his traffic watch. A good officer, Ascher thought, as he should be . . . as *I* would be.

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The old anger flicked at him and his clenched fist thumped his maimed leg. It had cost him the dream of his life, that accident. Never, now, would he patrol the city on a motorcycle like Buff Morgan. All he had to cling to was his book-learned knowledge of law enforcement (considerable) and his authority (unchallenged) as senior bridge controller, and the stories and articles thumped out on his little typewriter, which helped him through the long monotony of his days.

A change in the voice on the short wave caught his attention. "A 211 silent at Wheaton's All-night Pharmacy, 7th and Oak, Units 18, 4 and 2 respond."

Officer Morgan heard it, too. *Another of those damned drug robberies. Young punks!* he thought. He wished at times he was on robbery detail—the monotony of traffic control got to him now and then. He settled back to watch the steadily increasing stream of traffic onto the bridge, idly turning over in his mind the advantages of transferring to another division—Bunko or Homicide maybe. He would hate to give up his motor though. Unconsciously his gloved hand caressed the handlebars.

Out of the corner of his eye he noted that the red warning signals on the bridge were flashing. Something special was coming down the river—the fireboat, possibly. A Cadillac put on a burst of speed and made it across the bridge, but the gate was coming inexorably down.

Morgan rode his bike forward along the curb to take position at the open span. A line of cars came to a standstill, penned between the curb and the center divider. The massive structure of the bridge began to rise.

Almost immediately, the traffic began to pile up. He could see nothing passing under the open span, so he got off his motor and went over to the railing to look up the river. Nothing in sight. He looked downstream. Also nothing. So why in hell was the bridge up?

He glanced up at the control booth but couldn't see Ascher, craned his neck for a better view but could still see no one at the controls. How odd! He went over and climbed the iron ladder, but the trapdoor was bolted, there was no response to his knocking.

Uneasy, he strode back to his motor. The traffic snarl was rapidly worsening, people were beginning to get out of their cars, horns were beeping. There was still nothing in sight on the river, no one visible in the booth. He picked up the trans-

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mitter, pressed the button, began to talk into his mouthpiece.

"Adam-71 at 11th St. Bridge. Bridge has been up some time, operator not in view, no traffic on the river. Send back-up and Paramedics."

The next few minutes were a nightmare. Irate drivers left their cars to see for themselves that there was nothing on the river, no operator in view. The narrow walkways filled with irritated pedestrians, prevented from crossing the river to work. The horn barrage started in earnest.

Frantically Morgan signaled to the Paramedics and patrol officers when he saw them at last, making their way on foot through the increasing crowd. He could see two of them doing their best, with little success, to herd the onlookers back into their cars or off the ramp. Finally a sergeant, broad in shoulder and hip, followed by a pair of Paramedics, pushed through to him.

"How did a damn mess like this ever get started?" The sergeant's large, fleshy face was red with irritation. That *would* be McCluskey's attitude thought Morgan. He ignored the question and addressed himself to the Paramedics.

"The operator must have had a stroke or something. I couldn't see in through the window and he hasn't shown."

They nodded briefly and went up to see what they could do.

"The bridge telephone shows a busy signal. Can you beat that?" McCluskey said. "I've radioed for more back-up. They'll start diverting the traffic at the other end. It's fouled up clear to Main street."

Morgan, who was watching the Paramedics, saw that they were getting no more response from the trapdoor than he had. Then one of them uncoiled a rope with a grapple on one end, expertly tossed it, caught it on the structure of the raised bridge and proceeded to climb up for a look in through the window.

"*Hey,* you, in there," he shouted. "Can you *hear* me? Unbolt the trap and we'll get you out. Just reach over and unbolt the trap? Can you *do it*?"

Morgan and McCluskey had their hands full herding back spectators and kids who had climbed the bridge rails for a look. "All right, move back, keep a lane clear." McCluskey's huge hand saved one daring juvenile from an unintended dive into the water. But he had caught sight of a newsman. "Okay, let him through. Morgan, give him the story."

Morgan was surprised at this

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unexpected show of generosity but saw that a TV crew were pushing their way up behind. An appearance on the six o'clock news was not to be missed by Sergeant McCluskey.

The Paranedic who had been peering through the booth window swung himself to the gorund and came up to them.

"You're not going to believe this, but the guy's all right. He's sitting on the floor with his eyes closed. I kept shouting to open the trapdoor. He opened his eyes, gave me a wave-off sign, then simply took out a pipe and lit up. Oh, yeah, and his phone is off the hook."

"Well, get the Fire Department and some ladders and let's pull that cuckoo out of there." McCluskey's solutions were always direct.

"I don't know how they're going to do it, sir," said the second medic. "That's one of those wartime unassailable booths—sealed windows, steel sides. It's take a wrecking crew at least."

"Well, so what the hell. . . ?"

"We could try the City Engineer's office," suggested Morgan. "They might have some ideas."

A reporter pressed close. "Do you think this'll get the City Council moving on that toll highway? They're stalled for three years already."

"Is it your opinion, Sergeant,

this could be a Maritime Union maneuver, some sort of strike alternative?" shouted another to McCluskey.

"How in the hell should I. . ." McCluskey he remembered the TV crew, all eyes and ears. "No comment, no comment."

A sharp rapping finally broke through to them. Heads turned quickly toward the control booth. It was Ray Ascher, tap-

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ping his pipe smartly on the window above. He had opened the small vent space and was cooly looking down on them.

Out of the started silence McCluskey found his voice. "What kind of a game are you playing, Buster? Come on and put this goddamn bridge down." He was in fine form now that action impended.

"No, Sergeant, I won't." Ray Ascher's craggy features relaxed in a smile, quiet and determined.

"Are the controls jammed or something?"

"No, they're working just fine."

"Are you on strike?" a reporter called up to him.

"No, nothing like that." Ray's gaze was serene, he surveyed the traffic piled up before him like a general reviewing his troops.

"Is this some kind of protest," the TV newscaster hopefully held up his mike as the portapack camera scanned the booth.

"Of course it isn't," roared McCluskey. "He's just a damn nut, and we're going to yank him out of there."

"Take it easy, sir," a paramedic warned. "Threat's might turn him violent, if he's over the edge."

McCluskey paused to think. "Okay. Call in and get the department shrink out here. What's his name—Miller? Maybe he can deal with him."

Morgan decided to take a hand. He couldn't believe that this quiet unassuming man he exchanged daily greetings with was any kind of a psycho. He stepped forward and called up, "Hey, Ray, you know me—Morgan. What is it? Is there something you need.?"

Ascher seemed to consider this. "Yes. What's the precinct captain's name?"

Morgan, encouraged, shouted, "Captain Frank Sherman."

"Okay. I want Captain Sherman out here now." With a nod to Morgan and a wave to the TV crew, Ray Ascher once more disappeared from view.

THE SWITCHBOARD AT 29TH Precint station had received no more than the usual number of calls for the early hours but one of them had Captain Frank Sherman annoyed. Normally, this tall grey-haired man was distinguished by his cool, aloof manner. The unflappable type, he should have been enjoying morning coffee at his desk.

But this latest in a series of daring morning drug robberies with no collars or suspects got to him. *Five hits!* It reflected badly on the efficiency of his force and, ultimately, on himself.

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"Anything new on the drugstore?" he asked his secretary.

"You have the latest info—no suspects, the owner hospitalized with a fractured skull, partial recall of the license, L—52 color of car."

"Is that all?"

"They've been calling in on the bridge tie-up."

"Right now I'm not interested in traffic control."

The phone rang. "There's a personal call for you, Captain, about the bridge tie-up." His secretary held out the instrument.

Impatiently, Sherman took the receiver. His face reddened as he listened. After he hung up, he was in the Watch Commander's office in seconds.

"The operator in the Eleventh St. Bridge, Benson—who is he?"

The Watch commander had been expecting this and was ready. "Ray Ascher, Captain. He's called up here occasionally."

"Has he a back-up?"

"On compassionate leave. Death in the family."

He reached over to turn down the volume on his monitor, but it was still audible to both men? ". . . back-up needed at Main and 4th Streets . . . auto crash, many minor injuries . . . firehydrant damaged. . ." And then, ". . . Captain Sherman wanted Eleventh St. Bridge; operator Ray Ascher, will talk to no one else."

"Wants *me*? Have we got a file on Ascher?" He bit the wrods off like hardtack.

"Sergeant," the Watch Commander instructed, "query Washington on the NCIC computor, then check the precinct file.

They waited in silence. The report was back in seconds. "No criminal record, sir."

"Here's a precinct information file—all we have." The Watch Commander handed over a thin manila folder.

Captain Sherman took it and, pulling out the single sheet it contained, read aloud: "Raymond Keith Ascher, municipal bridge operator, age 50, no record . . . Unmarried . . . applied. Police Academy (Well, well) . . rejected, physical disability (what disability? head injury . . ?) member Mystery Writers . . published short stories, non-fiction articles on police work . . . etc. etc. Several calls received from Ascher, as follows: Nov. three—called, asked to submit a procedure suggestion . . . referred to Community Relations. Feb eleven—called, asked to speak to Watch Commander. Commander unavailable. Call disconnected. March two—called, asked to speak to Captain regarding a theory on recent

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burglaries. Referred to Community Relations."

"Your instructions, sir, on pest calls." The Watch Commander murmured hastily watching the red beginning to creep up above the Captain's collar.

In the ensuing silence the transmitter pleaded again, ". . . Captain Sherman wanted at Eleventh St. bridge, urgent. . ."

"Get me a Car," The captain said as he dropped the folder on a desk and started out of the room.

RAY ASCHER KNOCKED OUT his pipe into the ashtray he had placed on the floor beside him, looked at his watch and, pocketing it, rose to his feet. He stretched, briefly massaged his aching leg and looked out the window. Cars and people carpeted the ramp and spread out as far as he could see. He watched a ripple on the outskirts of the crowd and gave a small sigh of satisfaction. The mountain was finally on its way to Mohammed.

That the mountain was Captain Frank Sherman, was obvious by the tightening of police procedure and the angling of the TV camera. Ascher opened the vent window again and looked at the flushed, annoyed face of the tall man scowling up at him. "Are you Captain Sherman?" he asked.

"Yes, I am." The words snapped into the air.

"I want to talk to you. I've tried several times to convey some information. ."

"Well, what is it?" Sherman interrupted.

". . . to convey some information through the proper channels," Ascher continued steadily, "but no one wanted to listen."

"I'm listening. Convey it and get this bridge down." The Captain's tone resonated authority.

"What I have to say, I don't want to broadcast. Come up, alone, and I'll tell you." The bolt slid back with a thud and the door opened a crack.

McCluskey thrust a heavy arm across the ladder. "Let me, Captain, he could be dangerous."

"*I'll* handle it, Sergeant." Sherman's cool glance moved McCluskey back from the ladder. As he climbed the iron ladder the door opened to admit him.

The Captain surveyed the rangy, sandy haired man who faced him. He hardly looked the desperate type. The small booth appeared more or less as expected. What he did not expect were the typewriter, and the books propped and stacked near the desk. The title of the top

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one he caught in his professional survey was *The Criminal Mind*, another was *Principles of Law Enforcement*. If he was surprised, he didn't show it.

"Well, here I am. What do you want to say?" He waited for the harangue.

Ascher's voice was crips as the Captain's. "You've had several drug robberies."

"Was that why you called the station? With your personal theory. ."

"Which you didn't listen to."

"If you've tied up this bridge to get me out here for that I'll break—"

"I got you out here because I've got your criminals for you."

Anger gave way to professional discipline as Sherman asked, "You know who they are? You could have phoned in instead." His voice faded as Ascher merely looked at him.

"No, I don't know who they are or what they look like," he continued after a pause. "Or anything about them. I've just got them for you."

Sherman took a deep breath. "Then you'll hand them over," he said, his voice icy with disbelief.

"I can't do that exactly." Ascher was enjoying himself and his expression showed it.

Abruptly, the Captain clasped his hands behind his back and made his voice calm. His judgment urged caution with this man. The main thing was to get the bridge down quickly. "Then, this is a put-on, is it?"

"No, sir, I'm dead serious. I know one thing about them. I know where they are."

"Tell me, now." There was a last straw quality in Sherman's tone.

"Please look out the window, sir. Do you see the blue Mustang, seventh in line?" The little car was wedged securely between the bridge rail and the center divider, bumper to bumper with two large trucks. "The men you want are in that car."

The Captain looked out at the little car, then sharply at the man beside him. "What makes you think so?"

"I listen to police calls on my radio. Shortly after the first two robberies were called in, a blue Mustang crossed this bridge in a hell of a hurry. It was not a regular. I know them pretty well. When I heard another police call on a third robbery, I watched for the Mustang. When it came past as before, I called the precinct."

Captain Sherman had a sinking feeling in his chest but he kept quiet and waited.

"It happened twice again. Same thing. Called with no results. I saw the Mustang again

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this morning and heard the call-in. And I decided to take care of it myself."

"So you put the bridge up?" The Captain's cold blue eyes held a warming gleam. "And trapped them."

"It seemed the thing to do. They'll not connect it with themselves and are probably fuming along with the rest of the citizens about inefficient service."

Sherman's lips twitched with the sense of humor he usually kept well hidden. "What would you like me to do?"

"I suggest you have the car searched, Captain."

The Captain's jaw tightened visibly. "The laws that protect criminal rights say I have to have probable cause. You have a theory, no proof."

"I understand the problem of criminal rights," Ascher's voice was dry and his eyes went to the neatly stacked law books. "The last three times, I logged the time, date and license number. The police call-in times correspond. There's enough probable cause, I believe."

He reached over to the desk and handed the Captain the log book, his long thin finger pointing to three dates, times and a license plate, XYL 572."

"This morning's victim recalled only L. . .52" Sherman spoke slowly. "You realize you're putting my job on the line if you're wrong?"

"*And* mine, Captain. They'd hardly keep me on after this. Of course I can give you an out by threatening to jam the bridge."

A hard grin etched itself on Sherman's austere face. "I like it better the other way. Open the door."

Seconds later, Ascher watched him speak briefly to Morgan and McCluskey, then walk toward the blue Mustang. He saw the driver and his companion invited out and spreadeagled against the car. The trunk was opened by McCluskey, who searched and then shook his head negatively at the Captain. Ascher's mouth went dry.

Then he saw Morgan climb inside the car to search. He came out and Ascher could see the disappointed droop to his shoulders. Sherman, his back ramrod straight, looked a lonely figure, standing a little apart.

Suddenly Morgan was inside the car again, poking at the sun roof. He emerged finally and held up several small white bags.

Captain Sherman turned deliberately, looked up at Ascher and nodded, one professional to another, then walked through a

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cleared path to his car. McCluskey herded the handcuffed suspects to the patrol car at the edge of the crowd followed by the press and TV crew. A patrolman got in the driver's side of the Mustang.

Ascher smiled with satisfaction. With hardly a limp he walked over to the controls. With quiet competence, he pulled the lever and the bridge began going down.

Officer Buff Morgan watched the bridge lowering gracefully while he listened to the blast of horns and the cheers of the crowd. When the traffic had smoothed again to an even flow, he looked up and caught a glimpse of a lean, sandy-haired figure at the window. Ascher waved as he had done many times before.

Officer Morgan didn't wave back. He saluted.

MIKE SHAYNE presents—

Next Month's Headliners

WHO KILLED JOHNNY ROSELLI by DAVID MAZROFF

The New True Mafia Story

IT MUST BE YOU, HARRY by ERNEST SAVAGE

A Story of Unbearable Suspense

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An Unusual Story

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THE FINEST OF FAMILIES

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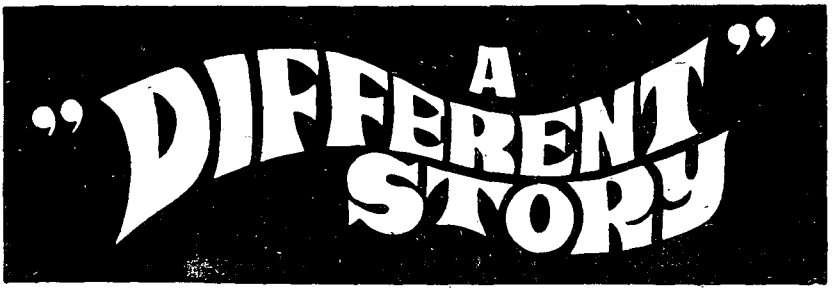

In the June issue of 1975, MSMM published a memorable "Different" story, BOOK OF SHADOWS by George C. Chesbro. Now, exactly twenty-five issues later, we are delighted to print another truly offbeat horror story by the same author, THE FINEST OF FAMILIES. As the title suggests, this tale deals with a genetic taint, but the skilled suspense-building techniques of the author, to say nothing of the taint itself, have here produced a genuine, spine-chilling, horror classic. Mr. Chesbro, for all of his richly earned success as a writer of "straight" mysteries, should be awarded an extra palm for his talent in grue.

by GEORGE C. CHESBRO

IAN HADN'T MEANT TO eavesdrop; he had just entered the kitchen of the Holman's Westchester home from the outside when he overheard the beginning of the conversation. Bewildered by the naked hatred in his parents' voices, he cleared his throat loudly and stepped into the living room. His father saw him first and stiffened. His mother gasped, crumpled up the sheet of paper she had been reading and thrust it behind her back.

"Mom? Dad?" Ian's voice trembled, and his face felt hot. "What's wrong?" He swallowed hard, quickly added, "I was out in the kitchen and couldn't help

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but hear what you were saying. Who's Johann? I never heard the name before."

"Johann?" His mother's voice cracked. Ian glanced across the room at his father, but Victor Holman was staring at the floor and absently rubbing the puckered field of scar tissue on the back of his neck.

"I thought . . ." Ian stopped when he saw the shadows move in his mother's eyes. "Look, I'm sorry," he continued, backing toward the kitchen. "I didn't mean to snoop. Hey, I've got to do some studying. I'll see you later."

"Wait," Victor Holman commanded softly but firmly. He sighed, then pushed himself out of his chair, faced his son. "Tell your mother and I what you thought."

"Dad, I know it's none of my—"

"I asked you a question. I want to know what you think you heard."

"Yes, sir." Ian wanted desperately to leave the room, walk away from whatever it was he had stumbled into. The tone of his father's voice told him it was too late. He spoke rapidly. "It sounded like Mom was reading a letter. Then you both started shouting. Dad, why do you and Mom hate this Johann so much?"

"What makes you think we hate him?" Victor Holman asked evenly.

"You said you should have killed him years ago," Ian whispered. "Mom agreed."

"You're mistaken, Ian," the man said firmly. "Eula, show our son the letter."

"Victor?"

"Do as I say—please."

Ian noticed that his mother's face was ashen as she slowly brought her hand around from behind her back and handed him the letter. Suddenly she seemed a stranger, separated from him by a gulf of unanswered questions that Ian now realized had been growing wider as he grew older and more curious about his background, his roots.

"Johann is your uncle," the woman said quietly, averting her eyes. "My brother. Read the letter. You'll see there is nothing in it of importance."

The letter, written in a fine hand on expensive stationery, rambled on, reflecting occasional touches of dry, good-natured humor as the writer recounted his journeys through Europe. It ended with a reference to a hotel in New York City where Johann would be staying until the end of the month.

"I don't understand," Ian said, handing back the letter. "Mom, why were you trying to

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hide this?" When his mother didn't answer, Ian turned to his father. "I don't mean to be disrespectful, Dad, but you told me we didn't have any living relatives. Why did you lie to me?"

It took Victor Holman some time to answer. He exchanged glances with Ian's mother, passed a large, well-muscled hand across his eyes. "Your Uncle Johann is a criminal," he said in a low voice.

"Of the worst kind," Eula Holman said distantly. She paused, added, "It happens in even the finest of families."

The man walked to a window and stood staring out at the tree-lined street. His voice was strangely muffled when he spoke. "Your mother and I came to this country to escape the—shame of what your Uncle Johann represents. Perhaps there are things we should have told you before now. But this country is so—clean, so *innocent* in its way. So *new*. It's easy to forget, to put off things. I suppose it is long past time that you knew."

"Knew *what*, Dad? I don't understand what you're talking about."

Ian's father suddenly turned to face him. His face was dark with stress and anger. "First, there will be no more talk of your Uncle Johann! Is that clear?"

"But *why*, Dad?" Ian pressed. "Is that *clear*?"

"Yes, sir," Ian spoke tightly.

"We have a good name in this country, Ian," Eula Holman said, clasping her hands tightly together. "Johann would bring trouble for all of us and smear that name. It's *you* we're thinking of, son, not ourselves."

Ian persisted, chasing the elusive fear that seemed to lurk behind every word his parents uttered. "But now he's *in* this country, and he's only fifteen miles away. Don't you think he'll at least try to visit us?"

"*No*," the man said. "He knows he would not be welcome." He paused, took a deep breath. "Ian, you know we have certain burdens that other families don't have."

"You're talking about the disease and the operation?"

"Yes," the man said. "It's in the genetic strains of your mother's side of the family, as well as my own. We had to deal with it when you were born. You will have to deal with it when you have children."

"I understand," Ian said. "You've told me that before. But what does it have to do with my Uncle Johann?"

Victor Holman went to his wife, put his arm around her shoulders. Eula Holman was staring at the floor, slowly shaking her head back and

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forth. "This weekend," the man continued. "We'll all go to the cabin at the lake. Is that all right with you, Ian?"

"Yes, sir."

"There we'll talk." Victor Holman looked at his wife. "The time is long overdue."

DESPITE THE AIR CONDITIONING, Ian was sweating as he rode the elevator to the hotel's 14th floor. His father had said they would speak no more about Johann—he hadn't expressly forbidden Ian to *see* him. Of course Ian knew the rationalization would not hold, but he felt driven. He had to find out what his parents were so afraid of, had to know more about where he came from and why he felt so lonely, so cut off from everyone around him.

His father had implied he would be told that weekend—but his parents had lied to him before about not having any relatives. Ian was afraid they would lie to him again, afraid he would never learn the real reasons why he often *felt* so strange.

The elevator doors sighed open. Ian walked quickly down the hall, stopped in front of room 1422. Without giving himself time to think about it, he raised his hand and knocked. After a few moments the door opened and Ian found himself looking down into the pale blue eyes of a man almost a foot shorter than himself, a squat, chubby man who looked decidedly more elfin than evil.

"Uncle Johann?"

Johann's craggy, moon face broke into a grin. He raised a trembling hand and removed an aged pipe from his mouth. His whole body quivered with excitement.

"You are Eula's boy," he said in English laced with a thick Hungarian accent. "You look so much like her. Come in, come in."

The obvious warmth of the man dispelled much of Ian's tension. He allowed himself to be led into the room, noisily kissed on both cheeks, and guided into one of the two red overstuffed chairs in the suite. "Would you like some wine?" Johann asked. "I brought it from the old country."

"No, thank you, sir."

"Some candy then?"

Ian smiled and shook his head. Johann's eyes clouded and he put a hand to his mouth. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "I'm by myself so much that I tend to forget. Candy isn't really much of a treat for you, is it?"

"No, sir," Ian said, frowning. "Is it for you?"

Johann smiled and put both hands over his paunch. "I'm

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afraid it is . . . as you can see. What do they call you?"

"Ian."

"Oh, excellent. A fine name."

Johann turned to walk across the room to the other chair and Ian felt a knot in his stomach. Johann's hair was cut short, and Ian could see that, aside from wrinkles of age, there were no marks on Johann's neck. The nape was clear, free of scars.

"Frankly, I'm surprised that your parents allowed you to come and see me," Johann said as he settled himself into his chair and relighted his pipe. "*Very* surprised."

"They don't know I'm here. I saw your letter."

"Oh," Johann said quietly, waving away a cloud of aromatic pipe smoke. "I see."

"Uncle Johann," Ian said, leaning forward in his chair, "I have to find out some things."

"What things?" Johann's face was hidden by smoke.

"I need answers, but I'm not even sure what the questions are. I just have this *feeling*—sometimes I feel I'm living in some kind of horror movie and I'm the only person who doesn't know the plot."

A voice from the smoke: "An interesting way of putting it, my boy. However, I don't think it's my place to provide either questions or answers."

"Uncle Johann, I'm nineteen! I've come to see you as . . . one person to another. I think I have a *right* to know whatever it is that my parents seem to be hiding from me."

Johann leaned forward in his chair, emerging from the smoke. "Your parents haven't *told* you?"

Ian gripped the edge of his chair, tried to keep his voice even. "Then there *is* something to tell!"

"If you say so," Johann said after a long pause.

"Uncle Johann, why do my parents hate you so much?"

The man stared for a long time at his pipe. "Perhaps because I am different, because I do not believe as they do. Understand—I mean no criticism of Victor and Eula, I am only trying to answer your questions as best I can. I'm so happy that you came. I often get lonely in my travels."

He paused, added quietly, "We must remember that everyone is entitled to his religious beliefs, even if we find them offensive."

Ian frowned. "My parents hate you because of your religious beliefs?"

"I'm afraid I'm not religious, Ian."

"Neither are we. *We* don't belong to any church. Then what are the 'religious beliefs' you're

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talking about, Uncle Johann?"

Johann smiled, but said nothing.

"You don't have the scars," Ian said.

"No." Johann put his pipe aside, leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes. "I think you are finding your questions."

"Then *please* give me answers, Uncle Johann. I was told that the operation was necessary for *all* members of our family, that we had a hereditary genetic disorder that could only be cured by an operation at birth! I was told that we'd die otherwise."

"That is obviously not true. There is no harm in my confirming what your eyes can see. I am not dead."

"Can you—*taste* things?"

A long pause. "Yes, Ian. Eating is a pleasure for me, not a duty. Without the operation, the taste buds remain intact. Loss of taste is one of the unpleasant results of the surgery."

"Then why did the doctor *perform* the operation if it wasn't necessary?"

For a few moments, Ian was afraid Johann wasn't going to answer. Then the man rose and motioned Ian to follow him into the bathroom. There, Johann produced a hand mirror and positioned Ian in front of a wall mirror so that Ian could see the back of his own head. Johann gently lifted Ian's locks so that the ridges of fish-white, puckered scar tissues were exposed. Ian closed his eyes against the ugliness.

"Do you really believe that a *doctor* did that?" Johann asked softly.

Tears came. Ian choked down a sob and hurried back into the living room. He heard Johann enter behind him.

"You mentioned feeling that you're part of an untold story," Johann continued softly. "Well, there are stories one hears told in sections of Europe about a cult that practices mutilation as a form of baptismal cleansing. Most people who have heard the stories consider them superstitions.

"They don't believe, for example, that anyone could repeatedly shove an icepick-like instrument into the base of an infant's brain without causing immediate death or, at the least, paralysis. Well, I can assure you that the stories are true.

"There *is* such a cult, made up of a number of families whose identities are a closely-guarded secret. The actual technique of mutilation is passed down from generation to generation, from father to son, for the son to use on *his* children. It is rare for members of the cult to marry outsiders, but

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it does happen—as when a family is discovered and forced to flee abroad.

"Such practices are illegal, you know. Of course, the son will still be expected to perform the cleansing rite on his *own* children, even if he is married to an outsider."

Ian made no move to wipe away the tears that streamed down his cheeks. "How did you escape?" he asked in a choked whisper.

"I was a sickly child," Johann said, added, "Fortunately for me. I spent the first six months of my life—and a good part of my childhood—in and out of hospitals. I was spared the rite because my parents could not risk allowing doctors to see such a wound. I was in my early teens before my father decided it was safe to cut me. I found out what it was he intended to do, and I ran away."

"Oh, God!" Ian whispered. He shuddered, relaxed when he felt Johann's hands on his shoulders, comforting him. He wiped away his tears, rose. "Thank you, Uncle Johann," he said in a voice he was pleased to find was reasonably steady. "I won't tell my parents what you've told me."

"As you wish," Johann said wearily. "And now you must forgive me, but it is an old man's bed time."

"You've given me the freedom to make the right decision when my own children are born," Ian said. "I know you're lonely, Uncle Johann, I'd like to see you again."

Johann gripped Ian's arm gently. "It would not do," he said sadly, "Go home now. And find it in your heart to forgive."

"Good night, Uncle Johann."

"Goodbye, Ian."

IAN SLIPPED IN behind the wheel of his car, which was parked across the street from the hotel where Johann was staying. He had been having trouble with the ignition, and it took him almost five minutes to start the car. He was about to pull out into the traffic when he happened to glance across the street just as Johann emerged from the hotel entrance and began to walk briskly in the opposite direction, toward Eighth Avenue. It was not the stride of a tired old man in need of rest.

He had been lied to again, Ian thought. It had been a small lie, about wanting to go to bed, but a lie nonetheless. And if Johann had lied about such a small thing, how much of the rest of what he said could be believed?

Impulsively, Ian shut off the car's engine, got out and walked after Johann passed

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into the garish puddles of light near Eighth and 47th.

Male and female prostitutes were lined up like soldiers of the night in front of movie marquees promising naked bodies and cheap thrills. Ian watched as Johann paused to whisper to one of the girls. The woman laughed and nodded.

A woman, Ian thought as he suppressed a nervous giggle; all Johann had wanted was a woman. He started to turn to go back, then, for some reason he could not thoroughly fathom, turned back and continued to follow his uncle and the prostitute.

Twice, Johann and the prostitute stopped to argue over where they were going, both times Johann won the argument with a show of money and they continued walking. Within ten minutes they were beyond the neon heart of the city, on a dark street lined with rotting tenements.

Ian suddenly felt dirty. He had no right to follow his uncle, no right to spy on him. He turned back up the street.

At the intersection, Ian stopped and looked back. His uncle and the postitute had disappeared from sight. Into one of the tenements? Doubtful, Ian thought.

His heart hammering in his chest, Ian slowly, quietly, walked back into the fetid darkness of the street. He paused at the entrance to an alley, brought up short by the faint, muffled sounds of the end of a struggle.

He stood, peering into the darkness. In the next frozen moment he received his final answer. He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came out as horror and self-revulsion constricted his vocal cords. The glow from the headlights of a passing car had revealed Johann on his hands and knees slaking his thirst at the bloody fountain of the dead prostitute's torn neck.

A shrieking voice inside Ian's head told Ian that his uncle *had* told the truth—at least a part of it—in his own bizarre fashion. The thrusts of the steel into the brain *were* part of the cleansing rite, one which was absolutely necessary. The rite was not evil, but an affirmation of faith, of goodness, a means of escape from an ancient curse as old as Europe itself.

But he knew he would never have an opportunity to carry on the tradition with his own children. The glow from a second pair of headlights revealed the crouched figure of his uncle, knife in hand, advancing toward him. The mad bloodlust in the pale eyes precluded any chance of recognition, of mercy.

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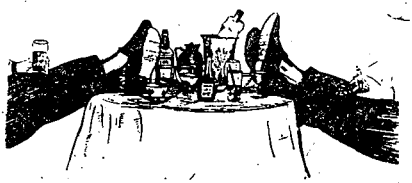

When Little Willy died from botulism poisoning after he ate a bowl of Sam's chili, business at the diner fell off.

by

LORRAINE MARISE

A LITTLE BELL ATOP the door frame announced Officer Garvey Moran's entrance to the small diner on Second Street. He stood a moment, surveying the familiar narrow room, which at this moment looked so unfamiliar. There were seven square tables, spaced evenly to the back wall. They were all shining clean, though the beige-patterned formica on each was worn to a plain dingy-grey.

Four wooden chairs were pressed squarely under each table. Twelve short red stools

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lined the worn grey counter, their tops gleaming a lighter red from years of seat-of-the-pants polishing. The tinkling of the bell reverberated in the uncanny silence of the cafe.

In three strides, Officer Moran's long legs carried him to the middle stool at the empty counter. The owner came out of the kitchen just then, pushing his starched white chef's hat up from his bushy grey eyebrows.

"Business no better today, huh, Sam?" the officer asked. "The place is usually packed this time of day."

"Nah," the husky man answered. "You're my only customer the past two days. I figure ol' Chubby down the street must really be packing them in."

Officer Moran shook his head slowly. "People are sure stupid, aren't they. Opening up yesterday, after being closed for a health inspection the day before, ought to prove that you run a clean kitchen."

"Yeah, but you know how folks are. The newspapers said that Sam's Café was the last place Little Willy was known to have eaten before he died. So everyone just assumed that it was my food that was contaminated with the botulism. You know that just ain't so, don't you, Garvey?" Sam whined.

"I know that, Sam." The young officer nodded. "The Health Department would have turned up traces of the bacteria the other day if it had come from your kitchen. They wouldn't have let you reopen if they hadn't exonerated you."

Sam clicked his tongue as he cocked his head. "That's just the trouble. They couldn't find any evidence of it, but they still aren't letting me off the hook."

"Why not?"

"Aw, 'cause just after Little Willy left I put his dishes and the pan in the washer, instead of washing the pan by hand like I usually do. High heat for a long period—like in a dishwasher—is the only thing that will kill the bacteria. They figure maybe I knew the chili was contaminated and was covering up."

The café owner set a thick brown mug of coffee in front of the officer.

"I don't know, Sam. It still doesn't make sense. Why didn't anyone else get sick who ate your chili then?"

Sam shrugged his shoulders. "Little Willy was the first one to order chili that day. After his order, there was just a dab left, 'cause it was leftover from the day before, see? So I threw it out to make more."

Officer Moran sipped the hot coffee, wincing as it burned his tongue. He set the cup down

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and said, "Still, you'd think he would have complained about it tasting bad, if the botulism was in the chili. You remember—I was sitting right next to him and he gobbled it up like it was his favorite dish."

"It was," Sam reflected somberly. Then he added, "That's the thing that makes botulism poisoning so terrible. Food contaminated with it doesn't look spoiled, doesn't smell bad and doesn't even taste any different than regular food.

"The only sign you get that you've eaten something bad is nausea a couple hours after you've eaten it. And, hell, you know yourself, if you started throwing up you wouldn't automatically jump to the conclusion that you'd been poisoned. Little Willy had a bad stomach anyway, so he probably didn't think anything of it."

Sam leaned his left forearm on the counter and tapped the formica in front of the officer with the finger of his right hand. "The real symptoms—the bad ones that let you know something is seriously wrong—don't come for at least another twelve hours."

He stood straight and flung his hands, palms up, in the air. "By then, it's too late. The toxin is already eating away at your nervous system."

your nervous system. Then it's over and out."

"Tough way to go, huh," Moran said, wondering lamely what reason Sam had for knowing so much about botulism. He sipped the hot coffee carefully, then, still holding the mug, said, "Sam, if the health inspectors think you covered up by sterilizing the pan, then they probably told the police they think you poisoned Little Willy on purpose. But what motive could they think you had for doing it?"

Sam batted the air disgustedly with one hand. "Aw, they found out Little Willy was my bookie, so they figure maybe he was pressing me for money. But I told 'em we were square," he added, holding his palms out defensively.

Officer Moran shifted his weight on the short stool. He lowered his voice and spoke hesitantly. "Sam, last week you told me you'd lost more on the horses than you could afford."

The older man gave a nervous laugh and answered quickly, "Yeah, but I paid off. Every penny. What'll you have, Garvey? Got some of that beef stew you like." He headed for the kitchen.

Absently, the policeman mumbled, "Fine, Sam." His mind replayed the conversation he

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had had with the café owner the week before. He had assumed that Sam placed his bets through a bookmaker, but he had never known who it was.

Moran had also know that Little Willy was into some sort of racket, but that elfin character had always been too cagy for anyone to blow his action. The officer cursed himself now for not having been smart enough to put two and two together weeks ago.

Moran gulped the cooled coffee, then smiled as he set the cup down. It had just occurred to him that the dead man's operation would most assuredly be taken over by someone else. If he only knew who all Little Willy's customers on his beat were, he could watch them until he got a bead on the replacement bookmaker. A bookie-bust was small-time, but it would definitely put him one step closer to promotion.

Officer Moran got up and walked to the pay phone on the back wall of the café. While he fumbled in his pocket for a dime, his eyes wandered through the open kitchen door to where Sam stood, ladling his beef stew into a bowl. Now Moran watched Sam pull a small unmarked bottle from behind a cluster of spice jars. He stirred half of its contents into the dish and returned the mysterious bottle to its hiding place.

The officer inserted his dime and dialed the police station, idly wondering what was in the little bottle. When he got no answer in the detective division, he returned to the counter, where Sam had just placed his lunch.

"What was that you added to the stew, Sam?" Moran asked. "From the little bottle?"

His friend flushed, embarrassed? "Oh, that's my special ingredient," Sam answered. "Like it?"

Officer Moran brought a spoonful to his lips and tasted it gingerly. Mentally, he tried to guess what the mysterious ingredient was, but couldn't quite recognize it. The stew did not taste bad. In fact, it was remarkably good, with a distinct flavor uncommon to typical mediocre diner food. "Delicious," he finally answered. Then, pushing the bowl away, he added, "I'm just not very hungry right now."

He stood up and threw a couple of bills on the counter. "Hope business picks up again soon, Sam."

"I sure hope so." The older man sighed. "Thanks, Garvey. Take care now."

Out on the sidewalk, the midday sun filtered down

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through the smog to remove the chill Moran had felt in the cool café. He walked briskly down Second Street a block, then ducked into the other diner on his beat. Immediately, he noted the accuracy of Sam's guess that Chubby's Café was probably doing an unusually prosperous business.

Every table in the small cafe was cluttered with plates, each chair occupied by a customer. All twelve stools at the counter were in use, and a scrawny bearded man sat on a chair by the door, apparently waiting for the nest available seat from which he could order his meal. The diner rang with voices and fork-to-plate clinks, contrasting greatly with the deadly silence in the café up the street.

Officer Moran waited at the entry until the owner, who was pouring coffee at the far end of the counter, looked up and spotted him. The short, fat man returned the pot to the automatic coffee maker and slowly made his way into the kitchen.

Officer Moran followed him through the doorway, past the cook at the stove, to the alcove by the back door. When he was sure they were clearly out of earshot of the cook, Moran smiled at the stubby owner, who stood grinning ear-to-ear. They sat down and put their feet on the table between them.

"Worked just like we thought it would," he said. "Sam's place is empty and yours is packed."

"It sure did!" Chubby beamed. "Too bad about Little Willy, though. I didn't think that rotten tomato sauce would kill anyone. Just make him sick and scare Sam's customers down to my place. Maybe you put too much in his chili?"

"Don't think it would have made much difference," Moran said, shaking his head. "That botulism poisoning is murder."

Chubby laughed as he tossed the officer a folded envelope from his pocket. "You can say that again."

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ONE MORE KILL

Scott had Linda run off the pictures—unaware he was signing his death warrant.

by MOSS TADRACK

BRAKES SQUEALED OUTSIDE Motel Room 31. It was night. It was California. It was forty miles into the Redwoods. Lynda Fay snapped off the TV and glanced at her watch. It was 8:30.

"Hi, baby! Why don't ya put something on? Christ, I hate black slips."

"You told me never to get dressed before you got back. Where ya been?"

"First National. A tin-can bank. You musta seen it on TV. George wants to come in. Okay?"

"Why can't he stay someplace else?"

"Man, Oh, *Man!*" He popped his lips. "Those counter chicks sure got scared."

"So, did ya have to kill one?"

He dumped his rod into a

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dresser drawer, snapped off lights. A slide pulsated onto the white wall. When he focused it, Lynda squirmed. She saw her husband's mug shot. He was ten years younger. The slide blew up his weak chin, his thin nose, his acne pits. The fiery red scar on his forehead grew far bigger than life size.

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"Ya like it, Baby? George found it in a post office in Napa and made a little snap. He thought I oughta bring it back. Don't it remind ya of the good old days?"

"Scott, ya promised to take me out tonight. Ya said we'd see the movie at the drive-in."

"Can't. Wait, there's George now. We're getting ready for a little job on the coast. A sweet little hoist. George, what ya waiting for?"

A tall thin scarecrow slid sideways through the door, shutting it instantly. If a razor blade had been used to slit an envelope the door's opening and closing could not have been faster. George dropped his Hasselbad on the bed and rubbed his bloodshot eyes.

"Evening, Miss Fay. Scott tell ya about the job? It was a good one. Not much loot, though. Only a few grand. But we had our fun then, didn't we, Scott?"

"Look, ya goddam ex-con, it's your fault. Ya told me, ya would take me out tonight. So, what's *he* doing here?"

Lynda spit her bubble gum into her hand. Then, deliberately, she shoved the whole massive pink wad onto the edge of the night table.

Scott ignored her and popped a sequence of six more slides onto the wall. They were all colored, and they took him from his first car rip-off in Iowa to his first hit in a dirty January alley on Chicago's lower North Side. During those ten years, Scott had taken to standing self-consciously tilted to the left side.

"Look, Miss Fay," George said, "I don't wanta be trouble to ya. Like I've told Scott a million times. I don't have to hang around."

"Forget it, kid."

"Scott, maybe your wife don't cotton to me?"

"Like I said, George. She loves ya."

Scott switched on lights, slid open the doors to the big closet. He took down a pair of grey flannel slacks and yanked them on. He slid into a cream colored silk shirt, and knotted a black knit tie. He used gold 45 slugs to clamp shut his French cuffs. He shrugged into his five hundred dollar black cashmere

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sport coat. He brushed his black hair. To finish his act he elevated his upper lip with thumb and forefinger and grimaced several times into the mirror.

Lynda held up the pinky finger of her left hand and licked its bright red nail with the tip of her tongue. She tilted her shoulder until one black strap fell off, exposing half a breast.

"Ya going to take me out or not? I'm sick and tired of this room. I've had six days of this room. I don't want any more time in this room."

Scott slid out of his black coat, slid into a soft and supple underarm holster, dropped a stubby .38 into it. "Look, bitch. I told ya we had a job to do. You can stay here and sort out my slides. Like I want them, see? I don't cotton to the way you're keeping them. They ain't in order. I want them all tilted. Month by month. Year by year!"

"Six nights in this motel! I'm not staying one second longer." Lynda jumped up from the bed. She made for the door, but Scott shoved her back down.

"Wait, Scott." George stepped forward. "I don't want to see any fights. Like, maybe Lynda's right. Maybe once ya should think of her."

"She's married to me. That's all the thinking she gets to do." Scott went to the far right side of the dresser and reached into the top drawer. He retrieved a new deck of cards, fingered off cellophone, broke a seal. He did a fast shuffle. "Okay." It's between you two. Choose a card. Any card. We'll make it low-ball. Lowest card wins."

Lynda reached, hesitated, pulled out one slick new card. She turned it over. It was the ace of hearts. George, hesitant, eyed her up and down. Then, after flicking back his blond hair and rubbing his chin, he reached over and pulled out the two of spades. Three seconds later, Scott and George were out the door, and Scott was gunning the Oldsmobile down the drive.

Lynda stared after them, then rose from the bed. She opened the door and looked into the night. She saw nothing but darkness lit by sparse naked bulbs. It was more of a resort than a motel—fancy enough, though. Maybe she knew the place, maybe not.

She took a bite of bubble gum and glued the ace of hearts to the wall. She went to the bathroom and fetched a quart of scotch from the dressing table. On her way back, she reached into her black purse and dug out lipstick. It was bright red and labelled Poppy Flame.

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In ten grey-green steel canisters, Scott Fay's life lay at her feet. Each slide, and there were hundreds of them, illustrated one more kill. Where Scott went, George went, and George snapped the pictures. Lynda, not thinking much at all, sorted out the one taken in the Chicago alley. It was all out of focus, and Scott's face stood in shadow, but his gun with its long, black silencer showed clearly enough.

Lynda sat down with Scott's canisters and began to pop slides into the carrousel. Lazily, using her button changer, she flashed them onto the motel's white wall. Seen through various colors, the ace of hearts made only a small ghostly shape.

Lynda chewed her gum, but she was not satisfied. She knew she could never get through all Scott's slides. It could take all night. She went to the big dresser, pulled out several drawers. Finally she dug behind a wad of dirty bras and panties and uncovered an economy size package of Wunder Bubble Gum. She shook out one pink cube and rolled it around in her mouth until the gum was soft and nice then she began to chew.

She poured half a glass of scotch. She sat on the big bed and found the taste of gum and Scotch satisfying. She would blow a bubble, pop it, then take a sip of scotch. First, she made a bubble, then she took a sip. First, a bubble, then a sip!

For the first time in ten years, Lynda felt it. She knew she was about to make a discovery. She didn't have the vaguest idea what it was, but she knew she had to find it in those canisters. She *had* to. First, a sip of scotch, then a bubble, then *pop*!

Now, she could put up with sitting there. She found it pleasant. Towards the end of Scott's career, George Falk had worked laboriously and hard at Scott's collection.

But at the beginning, Scott had made slides from old snapshots, taken back on the Iowa farm. Scott was twelve. Scott wore a tan shirt, jeans, black sneakers. He was holding an air rifle. God only knew what Scott had done. In contrast to later hits, Scott had never confessed.

"Okay, Lynda," her father had asked her dozens of times. "Why'd ya marry him then?"

To Lynda, no answer seemed the right answer. It was all locked up in a motel room. It had been California. It had happened in the California of some ten years back. Scott had needled it into her body and her brain with a gun. Scott had

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gyrated close to a big bed. Scott had shoved a cold gun into her belly. Scott had raked the barrel up and down her hot naked skin until all her flesh was one great jellied, quivering mass.

Lynda went on and on flashing slides against the white wall. She knew, somewhere, sometime, she had to find the right slide. She knew what it looked like, but she didn't know the man. She had never known the man. She had been sixteen then and married two years.

She took a sip of scotch, a chew of gum. She made another bubble, she made another *pop*. She poured another finger of scotch, she cuddled back down onto the bed. She turned slowly and eyed the black telephone on the night table. She felt like calling somebody. But who could she call?

Then, even before her finger pressed the change button, she knew this slide had to be different. For one thing, this was the only slide which didn't feature Scott Fay in prominent first place. This slide showed only a messed up bed, and a young girl—and a man with a black mask who stood leaning over the bed.

For some reason, Lynda had never looked at this slide closely. She had never wanted to. Her trauma had been too deep. But now, with the comfort of her Scotch and the good taste of her Wunder Bubble, she tackled a careful examination. Hell, she could have recognized the man years before from the two of spades tattooed to his right buttock.

It was George. Married two years, Scott had turned her out to his buddy, George. Moreover, George had paid Scott, ten, twenty—who knew?

Suddenly, the black telephone exerted an extraordinary appeal. It became a magnet. She couldn't resist. She adjusted her slip and walked to it.

"Is this the Napa Police Department? Okay, Sheriff's then. Listen! There was this bank robbery. And a teller got herself shot."

They took the motel's location, her phone number and said they would be over in half an hour. They couldn't make it faster. Lynda sat on the big bed, thinking, and then she got up and turned on the room lights. She had to welcome the cops. She didn't bother getting dressed. What was the point?

They came twenty-seven minutes later. Lynda had heard no car. When they got to the door, they explained that their squad car was hidden back in the woods. They had walked in. They were polite, and right off

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they looked at some of Scott's slides.

There was one sheriff, and one deputy named Joe Anderson. The sheriff, Sam Larkin, was a tall rugged man with whiskery chin. He had stayed up for several nights nursing a sick cow even before the bank job.

"Anything else, Mrs. Fay?"

She led them to Scott's dresser drawer. Sheriff Larkin reached in and took out the long barreled .45. He sniffed the barrel.

"Christ, I hate the smell of cordite."

"Yeah, Sam. It sure is the smell of death all right. Sam, what ya want us to do now?"

"Well, guess we'll wait right here and keep that snotty FBI out. Okay with you, Mrs. Fay? We'll make sure Scott don't hurt you none. He's armed—right? But that don't bother me."

They both swung chairs out from the wall and eased into them. They held their guns in their laps. The light bothered Sheriff Larkin's eyes, and he made her put it out.

"Better that way. He'll think you're sleeping. Right?"

"Right!" Lynda took a sip of scotch. She made a bubble. The scotch and the gum made a nice taste in her mouth. "Anybody want a drink?"

"No, thanks."

Outside, the darkness continued unabated, and no automobile sound disturbed it. The motel was situated far from the main road. Lynda knew it was more of a resort than a motel anyway. She heard one faint mosquito-like whine from far up somewhere, but that must have been the wind, or maybe it was a jet.

Lynda lay still in the darkness and kept looking at the white ceiling and kept her mind a blank. So it had been George. She might have known.

Before that, George had not been around much. George had been in the Iowa pen. Lynda made a quick resolution. So Okay, if Scott came back without George, she'd go ahead and warn him. She'd give him that kind of a chance. But if Scott came back with George, he could go straight to Hell!

Night tapered toward dawn. Sheriff Larkin and Deputy Anderson sat silent, not talking. When Lynda twisted her head, she was only aware of their eyes. Lynda did not stir. She didn't have to get up. She had her gum, and she had her scotch.

Shortly after three, brakes squealed. It had not been such a long time after all. Lynda lay silent, expectant. She heard the car door slam. One door slam-

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med, so George was not with him. So what the hell had he done with George?

Steps hammered the low stoop. "Hey, bitch! You got your way. George didn't want to come back. He found a chick on the coast. Can ya imagine?" His key turned in the lock. "What the hell? This room don't smell right. Lynda, what ya . . . ?"

Scott hung long seconds suspended in the doorway. Lynda knew he was already speed-drawing his gun.

"Mr. Fay," Sheriff Larkin warned, "we don't want to—"

Scott started shooting. Sheriff Larkin started shooting. Bright flashes laced a web of steel and fire through a dark doorway. Scott was pinned to the night. Scott collapsed in the doorway, and his gun clattered to the floor.

Sheriff Larkin told Lynda to wait, but she didn't wait. She went and turned on the light. Deputy Anderson lay huddled up, dead. Scott lay coiled loosely, his face slanted in the doorway. Scott's right hand lay open, and his fingers had shaped themselves into a vague claw, or maybe he was waving her goodbye.

Lynda sat back down on the big bed and reached for the slide projector button. One after the other, she snapped slides onto the white wall. They all showed Scott Fay in top form, his gun smoking, a corpse lying, a big smile on Scott's face. Then, finally, there were no more slides.

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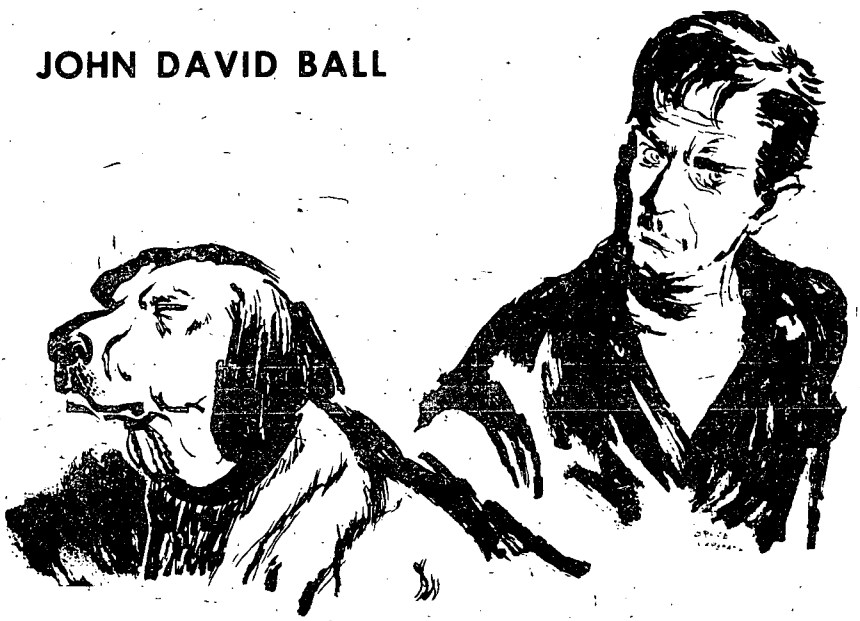
NIGHT VISION

by

JOHN DAVID BALL

Laurence and Jane had come to a parting of the ways. But the only way out for either of them was the absolutely unthinkable.



LAURENCE BIEDEBROOKE PLUNGED his overdone toast into the center of the fried egg which lay before him. He scooped the dripping yoke onto the edge of it before depositing it neatly in his mouth. As this was often the most exciting event of his day, the devouring of the breakfast egg was something he enjoyed with a passion.

Jane Biedebrooke glanced over at her husband as he stuffed the final bite of toast between his teeth.

"Don't forget your pills, Larry. Remember, vitamins for health." She then concluded

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their morning ritual by swallowing her high blood pressure tablet, followed by a necessary heart pill.

Then, for the first time after countless mornings of eating breakfast in precisely the same manner, Larry did something new.

"Jane, dear," he said, diffidently scratching his receding hairline, "I'd like another piece of toast."

Jane glanced up at her husband, slowly peeling the glasses from her nose in a gesture of authoritative surprise.

"Good heavens, dear. The only reason you're not the size of a house at your age is my insistance on moderation. You know toast is not only high in calories, but is also most unnutritious."

"Don't get excited, Jane." He dared the interruption.

"I'm *not* excited," she fired back, her voice rising. "Im just concerned for your welfare."

"But I'm hungry."

She paused, searching for a healthful way to pacify her husband.

"All right, dear, if you must. Then drink a little of your milk. It's high in calcium at least, and it's filling. Besides, if you don't drink it up, it'll just go to waste."

As she spoke she rose and went over to the refrigerator to take out the one bottle of milk. She ordered it solely for Larry, since she herself never drank it.

"Thanks," Larry muttered as he accepted the plastic glass she extended towards him. He raised it to his lips and let a small swallow trickle down his throat.

"Funny!" He frowned as he set the glass down. "It doesn't taste quite right today."

"What do you mean?"

"Somehow it's different tasting than usual. I suppose it's all right, though." He raised the glass again to his lips, but Jane forestalled him. She rushed over to him, grabbing his arm, causing a few drops to spill to the floor.

"Let me taste it first, Larry. It may be stale. I don't trust that milkman, he's been resentful ever since I cut his bonus out last Christmas." She tried to take the glass away, but her mind was still on the unfortunate milkman. "He deserved what he got, but ever since then I just know he's been ready to get back at me—I mean us."

"No, Jane," said Larry holding firmly to the glass. "There really might be something wrong with it."

"Well, I don't want to waste it. Milk is expensive. And it may be just your imagination."

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"Let's give it to the dog," Larry said brightly. "He'll be happy to get it and it doesn't taste that bad." He got up and began a slow shuffle over to the back door, waiting for Jane's disapproval. Instead, she took a sponge from the sink and began chasing the slopped milk across the linoleum floor.

Larry opened the back door to receive the expected and overwhelming assault of muddy paws and saliva as Jane's Great Dane, Baby, jumped to greet his friend. With a happy yelp, the dog placed two enormous paws on Larry's shoulders and began showering him with a dedicated canine affection.

"Nice Baby—nice dog!" He barely managed to dump the milk into the beast's bowl with a free hand. The dog jumped down to inspect its bonus and Larry beat a hasty retreat into the house.

The usual morning boredom between breakfast and lunch pervaded the Biedebrooke home. Jane sat down to her daily experience of soap operas, game shows and commercials in front of the TV. Larry wandered around the house, aimlessly looking for something different to do, gave it up as hopeless and settled down in his den to his day's work of stamp sorting. He had sold his small stamp shop some months ago and had begun a mail order business in collector's stamps. Jane had pointed out that it was the only sensible retirement plan for a man of his years.

Then the whole thing began to happen.

About 11:30 Jane opened the back door and called Baby to come for his morning brushing. Puzzled by the lack of an immediate response, she stepped out onto the porch to find the body of the Great Dane sprawled on the grass. She hurried to where it lay and knelt to touch its weaving head, her heart beginning to pound as her breathing quickened.

"Baby! Oh my Baby!" she cried. The panting animal looked at her in misery.

"*Larry!*" she screamed. "Come *quick,* something's wrong with Baby!"

When he came to the door, Jane was sobbing hysterically. He would have to take care of her first. It took a strained fifteen minutes of calming by Larry, plus four of her nerve pills, before she was again intelligible. He had managed a quick call to the vet but the doctor was operating and it would be a short time before he could come. When she seemed fairly well stabilized, he went out to investigate what had happened, first hand.

Baby still lay where Jane

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had found him. There was no visible wound to be seen. Reluctantly, Larry squatted beside the moaning dog. Its teeth were slightly bared and around its powerful mouth there was a dull whitish discoloration, undoubtedly from the milk. Larry rose, cleared his throat slightly and reentered the house.

Jane looked up, her face tear-stained, her mouth still tremulous. Larry's expression renewed her fears.

"Jane, dear . . ." Larry paused, seeming to fight with his words, "I think, er—I think Baby was poisoned."

"*What?*" Her voice rose hysterically. "*Poisoned!*" Who would want to poison my little Baby? There's no way—"

"I don't think anyone would want to poison Baby, dear," he interrupted quickly, then fell silent.

"Then what happened?" Jane's face distorted with the effort not to cry. "I don't understand."

Larry waited a moment, choosing his words carefully. He, too, looked frightened, almost like a child coping with a problem beyond him. "I don't know for sure, you understand, but I think it was the milk from this morning. The milk that tasted a little funny."

"But how could anyone have known Baby would drink it?"

"Not Baby, dammit!" The dammit, rare for her husband, froze Jane. "*You* don't drink milk, everyone knows that. That leaves only one alternative. The poisoned milk was meant for me."

DR. ARTHUR RICHARDSON of the Santa Razon Pet Hospital looked concerned as he knelt over the Great Dane. After a short examination, he rose and glanced around the yard. His eye wandered over the neatly cut lawn, along the rickety wood fence, and across to the far corner of the yard. He walked rapidly over to the garden's edge where a small wheelbarrow and some garden tools lay neatly waiting for use.

From the midst of the tools, he picked up a small, brightly colored box. With a smile of triumph known only to the great detective or successful tax examiner, he tucked the box under his arm and went back towards the stricken animal.

A few moments later, he entered the living room to find the elderly couple involved in a surprisingly heated discussion.

"I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation for all this," the woman was saying. "Who would want to—oh, doctor, tell me what happened to my Baby?"

The veterinary cleared his

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throat, "Well, Mrs. Biedebrooke, no one was trying to hurt either of you."

Jane flashed a look at Larry, more of pleasure in being right than of relief. "What do you mean?"

"Wait a minute," Larry said anxiously, "I'm certain . . ."

The doctor raised his hand and silenced them both.

"Let me explain, Mr. Biedebrooke." He paused and then, with the timing of a master sleuth, withdrew his arm from behind his back, displaying the brightly colored box.

"Snail poison," he announced. "I'm sure I'll find it when the stomach contents are analyzed. It was all over your garden."

"I still don't think—" Larry began stubbornly but was overhauled.

"Your dog ate snail poison, you can count on it. I'm afraid it happens all the time with pets. I've given an antidote but I'd better take the dog in to the hospital. I'm sure he'll recover."

Jane was ecstatic with relief. "Oh, *thank* you doctor! You don't *know* how relieved we are. My husband was certain someone was trying to kill *him*".

"Oh, stop it, Jane, please." Larry sounded utterly miserable. "I'll help the Doc put Baby in his van."

That should have been the end of it . . . but it wasn't.

The night that followed was far too sultry for the small air cooler to effect any change in the heated atmosphere of the Biedebrooke's bedroom. Everything seemed to have gone wrong. Larry burned his tongue while trying to sip his nightly ration of cocoa. And Jane's thyroid pills, heart prescription (the one for nighttime) and ulcer tablets all strangely vanished. Only after a half hour of frantic search was she able to locate them neatly packed away in the third bureau drawer. She remembered belatedly that Ruth, the cleaning lady, had been in yesterday and she always managed to lose or break something.

"Why can't she leave things where I put them?" She wound up at last her tirade against the offending Ruth. She popped the last necessary pill into her mouth, and washed it down with a gulp of water. As she sank onto her small twin bed a headache began to creep across her skull.

"Larry," she said querulously, "I spoke to you—aren't you listening?"

"My mouth hurts." Larry mumbled.

Jane sat up, pressing her right palm to her forehead. "What did you say?"

"I said, my mouth hurts. You got the cocoa too hot."

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"I did *what?* That's *cruel* of you. Why, my pills were all missing, I was upset."

"All right, all right, I'm sorry." Larry paused, as if reluctant to continue. "I suppose I'm still a little scared, that's all."

"Scared? Of what, for goodness sake?"

"Yes, *scared!*" Larry sank into his blankets, letting his shoulders drop from the propped pillows. "Jane, dear . . ." another pause, "That milk *was* poisoned, and it was intended for me."

"I told you at least ten times today that what happened was an accident so forget it. You heard what the doctor said. Good Lord, what's gotten into you anyway? After all, Baby is my little love. I'm the one who should be upset, but oh, no"—she paused for breath—"*you* go on about people trying to kill you. It's ridiculous."

She was in full stride. Her lips were drawn back and her breathing was harsh. "Do you realize how absolutely absurd this all is? Do you even have any idea what"—she drew a deep breath as she neared the finale—"what on earth you are talking about?"

Larry enjoyed a blissful moment of silence before replying. "You see," the words seemed to sneak timidly from his lips. "I had a dream last night. I meant to tell you about it today but after what happened I couldn't. It was kind of a—well, a vision."

"A *what?*"

"A vision," Larry said, his voice a croak.

At his words, at the utterly miserable look of him huddled in bed like a baby, Jane's mouth twitched and she began to laugh. As Larry grew indignant, trying to sputter protest at her with his burned tongue, he looked like an angry squirrel and her laughter grew from amusement to hysterical release.

One spasm followed another despite Larry's attempts to stop her. She could give herself a heart attack going on like this, but it was no use, so he just stared into his hands and waited. She fell back, exhausted at last.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what got into me." She almost started up again but controlled herself. "But Larry, you *can't* be serious. "A *vision?* Come *on,* now."

"Oh, but I am serious—very serious."

As she realized how much in earnest her husband was, Jane frowned and decided she must take him in hand.

"Now, dear, let's talk this out sensibly. Surely you don't believe in visions at your age."

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He half faced his wife who seemed refreshingly meek in her uncertainty. "You remember about five months ago, just before I gave up the store? Well, that day I was eating lunch at the new coffee shop across from Sam's filling station. I saw some hippy kids over there getting some gas. They were giving Sam a lot of trouble, acting crazy."

Jane cut in quickly. "I've heard this story before—many times."

"Let me tell you what happened that day."

"You've already told me in detail." Jane was becoming impatient.

"*No!*" Larry spat out the word with a vehemence that stunned his wife to silence. "I didn't tell you everything."

She sensed something behind the anger in his look and voice, something that reached out and touched her too. It was fear. She felt her body tighten and her hands began to clutch the blanket. "Go on."

"Like I explained before, I called the cops and they arrested the whole gang of them for disturbing the peace. Then they called in on the radio to check the car and they found out that four of the girls and one of the fellows were wanted up in Oregon."

Jane nodded slowly, "Yes?"

"What I didn't tell you, because I didn't want to scare you at the time, was what one of those girls said to me."

"You went and spoke to them?" Jane asked, accusation in her voice.

"Not exactly. She was already handcuffed and sitting in the car. I was standing beside it, waiting to see if I was needed any more. I didn't see her in there. Suddenly I heard her voice coming from in back of me. 'You're enjoying putting us in chains, aren't you?'

"I turned around and looked in the window. Her face was painted white on one side and she smiled a crazy smile. It was frightening, the way she looked at me. I just stood there. I couldn't even answer her."

Despite the heat Jane felt cold and found herself trembling. He fell silent caught up in remembering.

"Was that all?"

"No. She looked right into my eyes and kept talking. 'You're the one who called the cops. I know it by the way they let you hang around. And do you know what, you old fart? That's my beautiful man, Jimmy, they just shoved into that cop car. He's got real powers, you know what I mean?' "

Larry paused and glanced defensively at Jane. "I tried to say something to her but I

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couldn't get a word out. Then I looked over at her boyfriend and he was glaring right at me with a horrible grin on his face. She began to whisper to me. 'Listen, old man, my Jimmy never forgets or forgives. If we get put inside because of you, Jimmy will . . .' " he stopped and licked his dry lips.

"What, what did she say he would do?"

"She said Jimmy had lots of friends, and that they would find me someway and carve me up with a hatchet—kill me real good."

"Oh, my *God!*"

"Last night I dreamed about that girl and her boyfriend, a sort of vision, and she said my time was up. That they were going to do what they promised to me." He stopped and glanced at Jane's white face, then added quickly. "I would have passed it off as a nightmare until what happened to the dog this morning. It all fitted together too well."

"Why didn't you tell me this before, or tell the police?" Jane asked forcing down the fear she felt inside herself.

"You know why—remember what the doctor said about getting you upset after your last attack. I didn't want to worry you, but now—I thought you'd better know, just in case."

Jane felt suddenly vulnerable, her control slipping. Temptation to believe the fantastic tale her husband had just told battled her dogmatic devotion to the believable, the commonplace. She knew Larry was waiting for her to take charge, as she always did, and she made the effort.

"No," she began carefully. "No, Larry. This is not really possible. You must realize that. I'm sure those—people—are in jail and I'm certain that they've completely forgotten you. And how could they find you?"

"They heard the cops take my address as a witness. They won't forget, I'm sure. Poisoning Baby was just the beginning."

"Larry, you heard the veterinary. It was snail poison, that's all. But your attitude disturbs me. You're really not well. Maybe *you* should consult a doctor."

Larry stared at her as he caught her meaning. "You think I'm out of touch with reality, don't you?"

She looked away from him, biting her lips in embarrassment.

"Well," he sighed, "maybe I am. I just know I never felt this way before."

Jane Biedebrooke felt momentary desire to touch her husband—desire which she suppressed quickly. Firmness,

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not softness, was what was needed at this point. "Oh, no dear. You've been somewhat depressed since you retired. I think you need a hobby to fill your time."

"Jane, listen." Larry went to her side and took her hand like a child asking his mother for a special favor. "Please, please—let's take that trip to Europe together. Get away from here. We have the money and the time, so why not?"

So *that* was it, she thought. He had a new angle to force her to agree to that wretched trip.

"I've told you repeatedly that I don't like to travel. I have my friends here, the bridge club, not to mention the Spastic Foundation Committee. I can't just up and abandon those responsibilities."

He gripped her shoulders, his voice loud and intense. "And what if that vision I had *was* real. What if those awful murdering kids *are* coming to get me—cut me up with a hatchet?"

"*Stop* it—you're *hurting* me." She shook his hands from her shoulders. "I've had enough of this."

"But you do realize how much I want this trip?" His voice was drab now, without hope. "How much I need to get away from everything?"

"I have needs, too," her eyes challenged his, unyielding. "You'll just have to get over these notions. I can't leave my home."

They shared a moment of silence together. When he said no more, Jane considered the matter settled and got up to prepare herself for sleep. As she slipped into the adjoining bathroom she began a brisk discussion of her latest plans for the Spastic Committee Drive, in between gargles of mouthwash. Larry listened in silence until she was sliding again into bed, then dared an interruption.

"My mouth is still burning from the cocoa. I think I'll go downstairs and fetch a glass of ice water."

Jane yawned. "You do that, dear."

Larry guided his feet into the slippers which lay at the foot of his bed, adjusted his pajama top, and slowly shuffled out of the bedroom. Jane heard him plod down the stairs and flick on the hall light as he turned into the kitchen. She lay back with her eyes half closed as the minutes began to fade away into the timelessness of sleep. Slowly, she lost track of the sounds of her husband in the kitchen and the house was silent.

A terrific crash jarred her awake. There were more

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sounds—glass breaking and voices—laughing.

"Larry," she called out, "*Larry*, what *is* it? Are you all right?"

Another crash. The lights flicked off—then on—then off again.

With a thrust of animal fear, Jane tore the blanket off her bed and wrapped it around herself protectively as she got to her feet. Her heart was hammering painfully.

"*Larry?*" She could hear her voice reverberate, strained and desperate. "Larry, *answer* me, what's *happening* down—"

She was cut off by a man's garbled scream. "Dear God, no—*no! Please*—I didn't . . ." The words became lost in a howl of pain abruptly drowned, then buried beneath a confusion of voices.

She knew—oh, she knew what it was! Jimmy's friends had come as he said. They must have heard her. When they were through with Larry, they would come for her. She staggered backwards toward the wall, waiting for the sounds of the steps on the stairs, for the evil bearded faces. She fell against the wall, waiting like a tied animal. Then a door slammed and there was silence, a silence more frightening than the chaos of sound.

They'd gone. They *hadn't* heard her shout. The blood pounded through her temples as she struggled for control. Then a new sound filtered up from below, soft and unfamiliar. Her body began to tremble and a wave of nausea washed over her as she strained to hear. It was moaning. It must be Larry moaning.

She must do something. She felt the pain then, relentless, overwhelming pain. Not now . . . mustn't happen now . . . her pills . . . she must get her pills . . . where? She couldn't think . . . Larry . . . she had to think of Larry . . . telephone down there . . . She tried a step or two, but her chest felt crushed under a weight. The moaning grew louder.

Then there were footsteps on the stairs. She pressed against the wall, her eyes glued to the bedroom door. The pain was a fire now in her arm. She tried to scream out but she had no voice, no breath. Her dimming eyes saw a hand grasp the door frame. It was bright with blood.

She felt her body freeze, motionless, as she gazed from his awful dripping hand into Larry's ashen face. She mouthed his name soundlessly. Her eyes, barely focusing now, watched the dripping hand release the door frame and plunge against his stomach as if trying to staunch the great gouts of blood

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that spurted onto the carpet. Whitish, glistening membrane poked between his fingers.

Her eyes refused to see any more. There was only pain.

OFFICER BILL KEENBURG leaned against his car carefully rereading his accident report for the third time, looking for possible errors. He was a careful man. Then, almost reluctantly he dropped the pad of official forms into the passenger seat of the vehicle and wandered over to the miserable little man who sat on the steps.

"Well," Keenburg began, looking for a suitable place for a police officer to sit. "It's been a tough day for all of us, Mr. Biedebrooke. I'm terribly sorry about your wife."

Larry looked up at the large man. "Thank you, officer."

Encouraged by this response, Keenburg continued. "I guess she had this heart condition for a long time, huh?"

"Yes," Larry answered quietly, "she did. The doctor warned her repeatedly to avoid excitement, but then Jane was such a vigorous woman, on committees, doing good."

Keenburg massaged his forehead, searching for the right words. "I imagine that all the excitement about her dog yesterday was"—he paused tactfully—"a little too much."

"That's what the doctor seemed to think." Larry looked down at his feet swallowing hard. "At least it was a peaceful end, as I said." He forced back a sob.

The policeman was momentarily at a loss, then found the right advice to give. "You know, your doctor was right. Why don't you go away for a while?"

Larry straightened slightly in an attempt at manly self control. "Yes, I think I will. We *had* talked about going."

Another sob overtook him and the officer gave him a last consoling pat on the shoulder and slipped away to the ordered world of his patrol car.

One week later, Larry Biedebrooke was waiting in a departure terminal of Los Angeles International airport, clutching the handle of a large suitcase tightly in his right palm.

A few shirts, much other clothing, some necessary toiletries and a tape recording of sound effects over dubbed on a recording of the scene of the witches. laughter in Macbeth. There were torn pajamas soiled with catsup, the worn fuse from the house circuit, some rat poison and an elaborate plastic wound used by the Red Cross to simulate accidents of a gory nature.

It was a lot to carry, but it was going to be a long trip.

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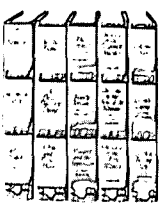

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